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# OLD·LADY NUMBER·31

LOUISE FORSSLUND

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Foster

# OLD LADY
# NUMBER 31

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BY

LOUISE FORSSLUND

AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF SARAH,"
"THE SHIP OF DREAMS," ETC.

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TO
MY MOTHER

J. U. MANCHESTER MAR 19 1940

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# OLD LADY
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## I

### THE TEA-TABLE

ANGELINE'S slender, wiry form and small, glossy gray head bent over the squat brown tea-pot as she shook out the last bit of leaf from the canister. The canister was no longer hers, neither the tea-pot, nor even the battered old pewter spoon with which she tapped the bottom of the tin to dislodge the last flicker of tea-leaf dust. The three had been sold at auction

that day in response to the auctioneer's inquiry, "What am I bid for the lot?"

Nothing in the familiar old kitchen was hers, Angeline reflected, except Abraham, her aged husband, who was taking his last gentle ride in the old rocking-chair—the old arm-chair with painted roses blooming as brilliantly across its back as they had bloomed when the chair was first purchased forty years ago. Those roses had come to be a source of perpetual wonder to the old wife, an ever present example.

Neither time nor stress could wilt them in a single leaf. When Abe took the first mortgage on the house in order to invest in an indefinitely located Mexican gold-mine, the melodeon dropped one of its keys, but the roses nodded on with the same old sunny

hope; when Abe had to take the second mortgage and Tenafly Gold became a forbidden topic of conversation, the minute-hand fell off the parlor clock, but the flowers on the back of the old chair blossomed on none the less serenely.

The soil grew more and more barren as the years went by; but still the roses had kept fresh and young, so why, argued Angy, should not she? If old age and the pinch of poverty had failed to conquer their valiant spirit, why should she listen to the croaking tale? If they bloomed on with the same crimson flaunt of color, though the rockers beneath them had grown warped and the body of the chair creaked and groaned every time one ventured to sit in it, why should she not ignore the

stiffness which the years seemed to bring to her joints, the complaints which her body threatened every now and again to utter, and fare on herself, a hardy perennial bravely facing life's winter-time?

Even this dreaded day had not taken one fraction of a shade from the glory of the roses, as Angeline could see in the bud at one side of Abraham's head and the full-blown flower below his right ear; so why should she droop because the sale of her household goods had been somewhat disappointing? *Somewhat?* When the childless old couple, still sailing under the banner of a charity-forbidding pride, became practically reduced to their last copper, just as Abe's joints were "loosenin' up" after

a five years' siege of rheumatism, and decided to sell all their worldly possessions, apart from their patched and threadbare wardrobes and a few meager keepsakes, they had depended upon raising at least two hundred dollars, one half of which was to secure Abe a berth in the Old Men's Home at Indian Village, and the other half to make Angeline comfortable for life, if a little lonely, in the Old Ladies' Home in their own native hamlet of Shoreville. Both institutions had been generously endowed by the same estate, and were separated by a distance of but five miles.

"Might as waal be five hunderd, with my rheumatiz' an' yer weak heart," Abraham had growled when Angy first proposed the plan as the

only dignified solution to their problem of living.

"But," the little wife had rejoined, "it 'll be a mite o' comfort a-knowin' a body 's so near, even ef yer can't git tew 'em."

Now, another solution must be found to the problem; for the auction was over, and instead of two hundred dollars they had succeeded in raising but one hundred dollars and two cents.

"That air tew cents was fer the flour-sifter," inwardly mourned Angy, "an' it was wuth double an' tribble, fer it 's been a good friend ter me fer nigh on ter eight year."

"Tew cents on the second hunderd," said Abe for the tenth time. "I 've counted it over an' over. One hunderd dollars an' tew pesky pennies. An' I

never hear a man tell so many lies in my life as that air auctioneer. Yew 'd 'a' thought he was sellin' out the Empery o' Rooshy. Hy-guy, it sounded splendid. Fust off I thought he 'd raise us more 'n we expected. An' mebbe he would have tew, Angy," a bit ruefully, "ef yew 'd 'a' let me advertise a leetle sooner. I don't s'pose half Shoreville knows yit that we was gwine ter have a auction sale." He watched the color rising in her cheeks with a curious mixture of pridé in her pride and regret at its consequences. "It 's no use a-talkin', Mother, Pride an' Poverty makes oneasy bed-fellers."

He leaned back in the old chair, creaking out a dismal echo to the auctioneer's, "Going, going, gone!" while the flush deepened in Angy's

cheek. Again she fastened her gaze upon the indomitable red rose which hung a pendant ear-ring on the right side of Abraham's head.

"Yew would n't 'a' had folks a-comin' here ter bid jest out o' charity, would yew?" she demanded. "An' anyhow," in a more gentle tone,—the gently positive tone which she had acquired through forty years of living with Abraham,—"we hain't so bad off with one hunderd dollars an' tew cents, an'—beholden ter nobody! It 's tew cents more 'n yew need ter git yew inter the Old Men's, an' them extry tew cents 'll pervide fer me jest bewtiful." Abraham stopped rocking to stare hard at his resourceful wife, an involuntary twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. With increased firmness,

she repeated, "Jest bewtiful!" whereupon Abe, scenting self-sacrifice on his wife's part, sat up straight and snapped, "Haow so, haow so, Mother?"

"It 'll buy a postage-stamp, won't it?"—she was fairly aggressive now,—"an' thar 's a envelop what wa'n't put up ter auction in the cupboard an' a paper-bag I kin iron out,—ketch me a-gwine ter the neighbors an' a-beggin' fer writin'-paper—an' I 'll jest set daown an' write a line ter Mis' Halsey. Her house hain't a stun's throw from the Old Men's; an' I 'll offer ter come an' take keer o' them air young 'uns o' her'n fer my board an' keep an'—ten cents a week. I was a-gwine ter say a quarter, but I don't want ter impose on nobody. Seein' that they hain't over well-ter-do, I would go fer nothin',

but I got ter have somethin' ter keep up appearances on, so yew won't have no call ter feel ashamed of me when I come a-visitin' ter the hum." Involuntarily, as she spoke, Angy lifted her knotted old hand and smoothed back the hair from her brow; for through all the struggling years she had kept a certain, not unpleasing, girlish pride in her personal appearance.

Abraham had risen with creaks of his rheumatic joints, and was now walking up and down the room, his feet lifted slowly and painfully with every step, yet still his blue eyes flashing with the fire of indignant protest.

"Me a-bunkin' comfortable in the Old Men's, an' yew a-takin' keer o' them Halsey young 'uns fer ten cents a week! I would n't take keer o' 'em fer

ten cents a short breath. Thar be young 'uns an' young 'uns," he elucidated, "but they be tartars! Yew 'd be in yer grave afore the fust frost; an' who 's a-gwine ter bury yer—the taown?" His tone became gentle and broken: "No, no, Angy. Yew be a good gal, an' dew jest as we calc'lated on. Yew jine the Old Ladies'; yew 've got friends over thar, yew 'll git erlong splendid. An' I 'll git erlong tew. Yer know"—throwing his shoulders back, he assumed the light, bantering tone so familiar to his wife—"the poorhouse doors is always open. I 'd jest admire ter go thar. Thar 's a rocking-chair in every room, and they say the grub is A No. 1." He winked at her, smiling his broadest smile in his attempt to deceive.

Both wink and smile, however, were lost upon Angy, who was busy dividing the apple-sauce in such a way that Abe would have the larger share without suspecting it, hoping the while that he would not notice the absence of butter at this last home meal. She herself had never believed in buttering bread when there was "sass" to eat with it; but Abe's extravagant tastes had always carried him to the point of desiring both butter and sauce as a relish to his loaf.

"Naow, fur 's I 'm concerned," pursued Abe, "I hain't got nothin' agin the poorhouse fer neither man ner woman. I 'd as lief let yew go thar 'stid o' me; fer I know very well that 's what yew 're a-layin' out fer ter do. Yes, yes, Mother, yew can't fool me. But

think what folks would say! Think what they would say! They 'd crow, 'Thar 's Abe a-takin' his comfort in the Old Men's Hum, an' Angeline, she 's a-eatin' her heart out in the poor-house!' "

Angeline had, indeed, determined to be the one to go to the poorhouse; but all her life long she had cared, perhaps to a faulty degree, for "what folks would say." Above all, she cared now for what they had said and what they still might say about her husband and this final ending to his down-hill road. She rested her two hands on the table and looked hard at the apple-sauce until it danced before her eyes. She could not think with any degree of clearness. Vaguely she wondered if their supper would dance out of sight

before they could sit down to eat it. So many of the good things of life had vanished ere she and Abe could touch their lips to them. Then she felt his shaking hand upon her shoulder and heard him mutter with husky tenderness:

"My dear, this is the fust chance since we 've been married that I 've had to take the wust of it. Don't say a word agin it naow, Mother, don't yer. I 've brought yer ter this pass. Lemme bear the brunt o' it."

Ah, the greatest good of all had not vanished, and that was the love they bore one to the other. The sunshine came flooding back into Mother's heart. She lifted her face, beautiful, rosy, eternally young. This was the man for whom she had gladly risked want and

poverty, the displeasure of her own people, almost half a century ago. Now at last she could point him out to all her little world and say, "See, he gives me the red side of the apple!" She lifted her eyes, two bright sapphires swimming with the diamond dew of unshed, happy tears.

"I 'm a-thinkin', Father," she twittered, "that naow me an' yew be a-gwine so fur apart, we be a-gittin' closer tergether in sperit than we 've ever been afore."

Abe bent down stiffly to brush her cheek with his rough beard, and then, awkward, as when a boy of sixteen he had first kissed her, shy, ashamed at this approach to a return of the old-time love-making, he seated himself at the small, bare table.

This warped, hill-and-dale table of the drop-leaves, which had been brought from the attic only to-day after resting there for ten years, had served as their first dining-table when the honeymoon was young. Abe thoughtfully drummed his hand on the board, and as Angy brought the teapot and sat down opposite him, he recalled:

"We had bread an' tea an' apple-sass the day we set up housekeepin', dew yew remember, Angy?"

"An' I burned the apple-sass," she supplemented, whereupon Abe chuckled, and Angy went on with a thrill of genuine gladness over the fact that he remembered the details of that long-ago honeymoon as well as she: "Yew don't mind havin' no butter to-night, dew yer, Father?"

He recalled how he had said to her at that first simple home meal: "Yew don't mind bein' poor with me, dew yer, Angy?" Now, with a silent shake of his head, he stared at her, wondering how it would seem to eat at table when her face no longer looked at him across the board, to sleep at night when her faithful hand no longer lay within reach of his own. She lifted her tea-cup, he lifted his, the two gazing at each other over the brims, both half-distressed, half-comforted by the fact that Love still remained their toast-master after the passing of all the years. Of a sudden Angy exclaimed, "We fergot ter say grace." Shocked and contrite, they covered their eyes with their trembling old hands and murmured together, "Dear Lord, we

thank Thee this day for our daily bread."

Angy opened her eyes to find the red roses cheerfully facing her from the back of the rocking-chair. A robin had hopped upon the window-sill just outside the patched and rusty screen and was joyfully caroling to her his views of life. Through the window vines in which the bird was almost meshed the sunlight sifted softly into the stripped, bare, and lonely room. Angy felt strangely encouraged and comforted. The roses became symbolical to her of the "lilies of the field which toil not, neither do they spin"; the robin was one of the "two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father"; while the sunlight

seemed to call out to the little old lady who hoped and believed and loved much: "Fear ye not therefor. Ye are of more value than many sparrows!"

## II

### "GOOD-BY"

WHEN the last look of parting had been given to the old kitchen and the couple passed out-of-doors, hushed and trembling, they presented an incongruously brave, gala-day appearance. Both were dressed in their best. To be sure, Abraham's Sunday suit had long since become his only, every-day suit as well, but he wore his Sabbath-day hat, a beaver of ancient design, with an air that cast its reflection over all his apparel. Angeline had on a black silk gown as shiny as the freshly polished stove she was leaving

in her kitchen—a gown which testified from its voluminous hem to the soft yellow net at the throat that Angeline was as neat a mender and darner as could be found in Suffolk county.

A black silk bonnet snuggled close to her head, from under its brim peeping a single pink rose. Every spring for ten years Angeline had renewed the youth of this rose by treating its petals with the tender red dye of a budding oak.

Under the pink rose, a soft pink flush bloomed on either of the old lady's cheeks. Her eyes flashed with unconquerable pride, and her square, firm chin she held very high; for now, indeed, she was filled with terror of what "folks would say" to this home-leaving, and it was a bright June after-

noon, too clear for an umbrella with which to hide one's face from prying neighbors, too late in the day for a sunshade.

Angy tucked the green-black affair which served them as both under her arm and swung Abe's figured old carpet-bag in her hand with the manner of one setting out on a pleasant journey. Abe, though resting heavily on his stout, crooked cane, dragged behind him Angy's little horsehair trunk upon a creaking, old, unusually large, toy express-wagon which he had bought at some forgotten auction long ago.

The husband and wife passed into the garden between borders of box-wood, beyond which nodded the heads of Angy's carefully tended, out-door

"children"—her roses, her snowballs, her sweet-smelling syringas, her wax-like bleeding-hearts, and her shrub of bridal-wreath.

"Jest a minute," she murmured, as Abe would have hastened on to the gate. She bent her proud head and kissed with furtive, half-ashamed passion a fluffy white spray of the bridal-wreath. Now overtopping the husband's silk hat, the shrub had not come so high as his knee when they two had planted it nearly a half-century ago.

"You 're mine!" Angy's heart cried out to the shrub and to every growing thing in the garden. "You 're mine. I planted you, tended you, loved you into growing. You 're all the children I ever had, and I 'm leaving you."

But the old wife did not pluck a single flower, for she could never bear to see a blossom wither in her hand, while all she said aloud was: "I 'm glad 't was Mis' Holmes that bought in the house. They say she 's a great hand ter dig in the garden."

Angy's voice faltered. Abe did not answer. Something had caused a swimming before his eyes which he did not wish his wife to see; so he let fall the handle of the express-wagon and, bending his slow back, plucked a sprig of "old-man." Though he could not have expressed his sentiments in words, the garden brought poignant recollections of the hopes and promises which had thrown their rose color about the young days of his marriage. His hopes had never blossomed into

fulfilment. His promises to the little wife had been choked by the weeds of his own inefficiency. Worse than this, the bursting into bloom of seeds of selfish recklessness in himself was what had turned the garden of their life into an arid waste. And now, in their dry and withered old age, he and Angy were being torn up by the roots, flung as so much rubbish by the road-side.

"Mother, I be dretful sorry ter take yew away from your posies," muttered Abraham as he arose with his green sprig in his hand.

With shaking fingers, Angy sought a pin hidden beneath her basque. "Father, shall I pin yer 'old-man' in yer buttonhole?" she quavered. Then as he stooped for her to arrange the

posy, she whispered: "I would n't care, 'cept fer what folks must say. Le' 's hurry before any one sees us. I told everybody that we wa'n't a-gwine ter break up till ter-morrer mornin'."

Fortunately, there was a way across lots to the Old Ladies' Home, an unfrequented by-path over a field and through a bit of woodland, which would bring the couple almost unobserved to a side gate.

Under ordinary circumstances, Angeline would never have taken this path; for it exposed her carefully patched and newly polished shoes to scratches, her fragile, worn silk skirt and stiff, white petticoat to brambles. Moreover, the dragging of the loaded little wagon was more difficult here for Abraham. But they both preferred

the narrower, rougher way to facing the curious eyes of all Shoreville now, the pitying windows of the village street.

As the couple came to the edge of the woodland, they turned with one accord and looked back for the last glimpse of the home. Blazing gold-red against the kitchen window flamed the afternoon sunlight.

"Look a' that!" Angy cried eagerly, as one who beholds a promise in the skies. "Jest see, Father; we could n't 'a' made out that winder this fur at all ef the sun had n't struck it jest so. I declar' it seems almost as ef we could see the rocker, tew. It 's tew bad, Abe, that we had ter let yer old rocker go. D' yew remember—?" She laid her hand on his arm, and lifted her gaze,

growing clouded and wistful, to his face. "When we bought the chair, we thought mebbe some day I 'd be rocking a leetle baby in it. 'T was then, yew ricollec', we sorter got in the habit of callin' each other 'father' an' 'mother.' I wonder ef the young 'uns had come—"

"Le' 's hurry," interrupted Abe almost gruffly. "Le' 's hurry."

They stumbled forward with bowed heads in silence, until of a sudden they were startled by a surprised hail of recognition, and looked up to find themselves confronted by a bent and gray old man, a village character, a harmless, slightly demented public charge known as "Ishmael" or "Captain Rover."

"Whar yew goin', Cap'n Rose?"

The old couple had drawn back at the sight of the gentle vagabond, and Angy clutched at her husband's arm, her heart contracting at the thought that he, too, had become a pauper.

"I 'm a-takin' my wife ter jine the old ladies over thar ter the Hum," Abe answered, and would have passed on, shrinking from the sight of himself as reflected in poor Ishmael.

But the "innocent" placed himself in their path.

"Yew ain't a-goin' ter jine 'em, tew?" he bantered.

Abe forced a laugh to his lips in response.

"No, no; I 'm goin' over ter Yaphank ter board on the county."

Again the couple would have passed on, their faces flushed, their eyes low-

ered, had not Ishmael flung out one hand to detain them while he plunged the other hurriedly into his pocket.

"Here." He drew out a meager handful of nickels and pennies, his vacant smile grown wistful. "Here, take it, Cap'n Rose. It 's all I got. I can't count it myself, but yew can. Don't yew think it 's enough ter set yew up in business, so yew won't have ter go ter the poorhouse? The poorhouse is a bad place. I was there last winter. I don't like the poorhouse."

He rambled on of the poorhouse. Angy, panting for breath, one hand against the smothering pain at her heart, was trying, with the other, to drag "Father" along. "Father" was shaking his head at Ishmael, at the proffered nickels and pennies—shaking

his head and choking. At length he found his voice, and was able to smile at his would-be benefactor with even the ghost of a twinkle in his eye.

"Much obliged, Cap'n Rover; but yew keep yer money fer terbaccy. I ain't so high-toned as yew. I 'll take real comfort at the poorhouse. S' long; thank yer. S' long."

Ishmael went on his way muttering to himself, unhappily jingling his rejected alms; while Angy and Abe resumed their journey.

As they came to the gate of the Old Ladies' Home, Angy seized hold of her husband's arm, and looking up into his face pleaded earnestly:

"Father, let 's take the hunderd dollars fer a fambly tombstun an' go ter the poorhouse tergether!"

He shook her off almost roughly and lifted the latch of the gate.

"Folks 'd say we was crazy, Mother."

There was no one in sight as he dragged in the express-cart and laid down the handle. Before him was a long, clean-swept path ending apparently in a mass of shrubbery; to the left was a field of sweet corn reaching to the hedge; to the right a strong and sturdy growth of pole lima beans; and just within the entrance, beneath the sweeping plumes of a weeping-willow tree, was a shabby but inviting green bench.

Abe's glance wandered from the bench to his wife's face. Angy could not lift her eyes to him; with bowed head she was latching and unlatching the gate through which he must pass.

He looked at the sun and thoughtfully made reckon of the time. There were still two hours before he could take the train which—

"Let 's go set deown a spell afore—" he faltered—"afore we say good-by."

She made no answer. She told herself over and over that she must—simply must—stop that "all-of-a-tremble" feeling which was going on inside of her. She stepped from the gate to the bench blindly, with Abe's hand on her arm, though, still blindly, with exaggerated care she placed his carpet-bag on the grass beside her.

He laid down his cane, took off his high hat and wiped his brow. He looked at her anxiously. Still she could not lift her blurred eyes, nor could she check her trembling.

Seeing how she shook, he passed his arm around her shoulder. He murmured something—what, neither he nor she knew—but the love of his youth spoke in the murmur, and again fell the silence.

Angy's eyes cleared. She struggled to speak, aghast at the thought that life itself might be done before ever they could have one hour together again; but no words came. So much—so much to say! She reached out her hand to where his rested upon his knee. Their fingers gripped, and each felt a sense of dreary cheer to know that the touch was speaking what the tongue could not utter.

Time passed swiftly. The silent hour sped on. The young blades of corn gossiped gently along the field.

Above, the branches of the willow swished and swayed to the rhythm of the soft, south wind.

"How still, how still it is!" whispered the breeze.

"Rest, rest, rest!" was the lullaby swish of the willow.

The old wife nestled closer to Abraham until her head touched his shoulder. He laid his cheek against her hair and the carefully preserved old bonnet. Involuntarily she raised her hand, trained by the years of pinching economy, to lift the fragile rose into a safer position. He smiled at her action; then his arm closed about her spasmodically and he swallowed a lump in his throat.

The afternoon was waning. Gradually over the turmoil of their hearts

stole the garden's June-time spirit of drowsy repose.

They leaned even closer to each other. The gray of the old man's hair mingled with the gray beneath Angeline's little bonnet. Slowly his eyes closed. Then even as Angy wondered who would watch over the slumbers of his worn old age in the poorhouse, she, too, fell asleep.

## III

### THE CANDIDATE

THE butcher's boy brought the tidings of the auction sale in at the kitchen door of the Old Ladies' Home even while Angy and Abe were lingering over their posies, and the inmates of the Home were waiting to receive the old wife with the greater sympathy and the deeper spirit of welcome from the fact that two of the twenty-nine members had known her from girlhood, away back in the boarding-school days.

"Yop," said the boy, with one eye

upon the stout matron, who was critically examining the meat that he had brought. "Yop, the auction's over, an' Cap'n Rose, he— Don't that cut suit you, Miss Abigail? You won't find a better, nicer, tenderer, and more juicier piece of shoulder this side of New York. Take it back, did you say? All right, ma'am, all right!" His face assumed a look of resignation: these old ladies made his life a martyrdom. He used to tell the "fellers" that he spent one half his time carrying orders back and forth from the Old Ladies' Home. But now, in spite of his meekness of manner, he did not intend to take this cut back. So with Machiavellian skill he hastened on with his gossip.

"Yop, an' they only riz one hundred

dollars an' two cents—one hundred dollars an' a postage-stamp. I guess it 's all up with the cap'n an' the Old Men's. I don't see 'em hangin' out no 'Welcome' sign on the strength of that."

"You 're a horrid, heartless little boy!" burst forth Miss Abigail, and, flinging the disputed meat on the table, she sank down into the chair, completely overcome by sorrow and indignation. "You 'll be old yerself some day," she sobbed, not noticing that he was stealthily edging toward the door, one eye on her, one on to-morrow's pot-roast. "I tell yew, Tommy," regaining her accustomed confiding amiability, as she lifted the corner of her apron to wipe her eyes, "Miss Ellie will feel some kind o' bad, tew. Yer know me

an' her an' Angy all went ter school tergether, although Miss Ellie is so much younger 'n the rest o' us that we call her the baby. Here! Where—"

But he was gone. Sighing heavily, the matron put the meat in the ice-box, and then made her slow, lumbering way into the front hall, or community-room, where the sisters were gathered in a body to await the new arrival.

"Waal, say!" she supplemented, after she had finished telling her pitiably brief story, "thar 's trouble ernough ter go 'round, hain't thar?"

Aunt Nancy Smith, who never believed in wearing her heart on her sleeve, sniffed and thumped her cane on the floor.

"Yew young folks," she affirmed,

herself having seen ninety-nine winters, while Abigail had known but a paltry sixty-five, "yew allers go an' cut yer pity on the skew-gee. I don't see nothin' ter bawl an' beller erbout. I say that any man what can't take kere o' himself, not ter mention his wife, should orter go ter the poorhouse."

But the matriarch's voice quavered even more than usual, and as she finished she hastily bent down and felt in her deep skirt-pocket for her snuff-box.

Now the Amazonian Mrs. Homan, a widow for the third time, made sturdy retort:

"That 's jest like yew old maids—always a-blamin' the men. Yew kin jest bet I never would have let one of my husbands go ter the poorhouse. It would have mortified me dretful. It

must be a purty poor sort of a woman what can't take care of one man and keep a roof over his head. Why, my second, Oliver G., used ter say—"

"Oh!" Miss Ellie wrung her hands, "can't we do somethin'?"

"I could do a-plenty," mourned Miss Abigail, "ef I only had been savin'. Here I git a salary o' four dollars a month, an' not one penny laid away."

"Yew fergit," spoke some one gently, "that it takes consid'able ter dress a matron proper."

Aunt Nancy, who had been sneezing furiously at her own impotence, now found her speech again.

"We 're a nice set ter talk erbout dewin' somethin'—a passel o' poor ole critters like us!" Her cackle of embittered laughter was interrupted by

the low, cultivated voice of the belle of the Home, "Butterfly Blossy."

"We 've *got* to do something," said Blossy firmly.

When Blossy spoke with such decision, every one of the sisters pricked up her ears. Blossy might be "a shaller-pate"; she might arrange the golden-white hair of her head as befitted the crowning glory of a young girl, with puffs and rolls and little curls, and—more than one sister suspected—with the aid of "rats"; she might gown herself elaborately in the mended finery of the long ago, the better years; she might dress her lovely big room—the only double bedchamber in the house, for which she had paid a double entrance fee—in all sorts of gewgaws, little ornaments, hand-

painted plaques of her own producing, lace bedspreads, embroidered splashers and pillow-shams; she might even permit herself a suitor who came twice a year more punctually than the line-storms, to ask her withered little hand in marriage—but her heart was in the right place, and on occasion she had proved herself a master hand at "fixin' things."

"Yes," said she, rising to her feet and flinging out her arms with an eloquent gesture, "we 've got to do something, and there 's just one thing to do, girls: take the captain right here—here"—she brought her hands to the laces on her bosom—"to our hearts!"

At first there was silence, with the ladies staring blankly at Blossy and then at one another. Had they heard

aright? Then there came murmurs and exclamations, with Miss Abigail's voice gasping above the others:

"What would the directors say?"

"What do they always say when we ask a favor?" demanded Blossy. "'How much will it cost?' It won't cost a cent."

"Won't, eh?" snapped Aunt Nancy. "How on arth be yew goin' ter vittle him? I hain't had a second dish o' peas this year."

"Some men eat more an' some less," remarked Sarah Jane, as ill-favored a spinster as ever the sun shone on; "generally it means so much grub ter so much weight."

Miss Abigail glanced up at the ceiling, while Lazy Daisy, who had refused to tip the beam for ten years,

surreptitiously hid an apple into which she had been biting.

"Le' 's have 'em weighed," suggested a widow, Ruby Lee, with a pretty, well-preserved little face and figure, "an' ef tergether they don't come up to the heartiest one of us—"

Miss Abigail made hasty interruption:

"Gals, hain't yew never noticed that the more yew need the more yew git? Before Jenny Bell went to live with her darter I did n't know what I should dew, for the taters was gittin' pooty low. Yew know she used ter eat twenty ter a meal an' then look hungry at the platter. An' then ef old Square Ely did n't come a-drivin' up one mornin' with ten bushel in the farm wagon! He 'd been savin' 'em fer us all winter

fer fear we might run short in the spring. Gals, thar 's one thing yew kin depend on, the foresightedness of the Lord. I hain't afraid ter risk a-stretchin' the board an' keep o' thirty ter pervide ample fer thirty-one. Naow, haow many of yew is willin' ter try it?"

Every head nodded, "I am"; every eye was wet with the dew of merciful kindness; and Mrs. Homan and Sarah Jane, who had flung plates at each other only that morning, were observed to be holding hands.

"But haow on arth be we a-goin' ter sleep him?" proceeded the matron uneasily. "Thar hain't a extry corner in the hull place. Puttin' tew people in No. 30 is out of the question—it 's jest erbout the size of a Cinderella shoe-

box, anyhow, an' the garret leaks—"

She paused, for Blossy was pulling at her sleeve, the real Blossy, warm-hearted, generous, self-deprecating.

"I think No. 30 is just the coziest little place for one! Do let me take it, Miss Abigail, and give the couple my great big barn of a room."

Aunt Nancy eyed her suspiciously. "Yew ain't a-gwine ter make a fool o' yerself, an' jump over the broomstick ag'in?" For Blossy's old suitor; Samuel Darby, had made one of his semiannual visits only that morning.

The belle burst into hysterical and self-conscious laughter, as she found every glance bent upon her.

"Oh, no, no; not that. But I confess that I am tired to death of this perpetual dove-party. I just simply can't

live another minute without a man in the house.

"Now, Miss Abigail," she added imperiously, "you run across lots and fetch him home."

## IV

### ONE OF THEM

AH! but Abraham slept that night as if he had been drawn to rest under the compelling shelter of the wings of all that flock which in happier days he had dubbed contemptuously "them air old hens." Never afterward could the dazed old gentleman remember how he had been persuaded to come into the house and up the stairs with Angeline. He only knew that in the midst of that heart-breaking farewell at the gate, Miss Abigail, all out of breath with running, red in the face, but exceedingly hearty of manner, had suddenly appeared.

"Shoo, shoo, shoo!" this stout angel had gasped. "Naow, Cap'n Abe, yew need n't git narvous. We 're as harmless as doves. Run right erlong. Yew won't see anybody ter-night. Don't say a word. It 's all right. Sssh! Shoo!" And then, lo! he was not in the County Almshouse, but in a beautiful bright bedchamber with a wreath of immortelles over the mantel, alone with Angy.

Afterward, it all seemed the blur of a dream to him, a dream which ended when he had found his head upon a cool, white pillow, and had felt glad, glad—dear God, how glad!—to know that Angy was still within reach of his outstretched hand; and so he had fallen asleep. But when he awoke in the morning, there stood Angeline in front

of the glass taking her hair out of curl papers; and then he slowly began to realize the tremendous change that had come into their lives, when his wife committed the unprecedented act of taking her crimps out *before* breakfast. He realized that they were to eat among strangers. He had become the guest of thirty "women-folks." No doubt he should be called "Old Gal Thirty-one." He got up and dressed very, very slowly. The bewildered gratitude, the incredulous thanksgiving of last night, were as far away as yesterday's sunset. A great seriousness settled upon Abe's lean face. At last he burst forth:

"One to thirty! Hy-guy, I 'm in fer it!" How had it happened, he wondered. They had given him no time to

think. They had swooped down upon him when his brain was dulled with anguish. Virtually, they had kidnapped him. Why had they brought him here to accept charity of a women's institution? Why need they thus intensify his sense of shame at his life's failure, and, above all, at his failure to provide for Angeline? In the poorhouse he would have been only one more derelict; but here he stood alone to be stared at and pitied and thrown a sickly-satisfying crumb. With a sigh from the very cellar of his being, he muttered:

"Aye, Mother, why did n't yew let me go on ter the County House? That air 's the place fer a worn-out old hull like me. Hy-guy!" he ejaculated, beads of sweat standing out on his

forehead, "I 'd ruther lay deown an' die th'n face them air women."

"Thar, thar!" soothingly spoke Angy, laying her hand on his arm. "Thar, thar, Father! Jest think haow dretful I 'd feel a-goin' deown without yer."

"So you would!" strangely comforted. "So you would, my dear!" For her sake he tried to brighten up. He joked clumsily as they stood on the threshold of the chamber, whispering, blinking his eyes to make up for the lack of their usually ready twinkle.

"Hol' on a minute; supposin' I fergit whether I be a man er a woman?"

Her love gave inspiration to her answer: "I 'll lean on yer, Abe."

Just then there came the loud, imperative clanging of the breakfast-

bell; and she urged him to hurry, as "it would n't dew" for them to be late the first morning of all times. But he only answered by going back into the room to make an anxious survey of his reflection in the glass. He shook his head reprovingly at the bearded countenance, as if to say: "You need not pride yourself any longer on looking like Abraham Lincoln, for you have been turned into a miserable old woman."

Picking up the hair-brush, he held it out at arm's length to Angy. "Won't yew slick up my hair a leetle bit, Mother?" he asked, somewhat shamefacedly. "I can't see extry well this mornin'."

"Why, Abe! It 's slicked ez slick ez it kin be naow." However, the old

wife reached up as he bent his tall, angular form over her, and smoothed again his thin, wet locks. He laughed a little, self-mockingly, and she laughed back, then urged him into the hall, and, slipping ahead, led the way downstairs. At the first landing, which brought them into full view of the lower hall, he paused, possessed with the mad desire to run away and hide, for at the foot of the stairway stood the entire flock of old ladies. Twenty-nine pairs of eyes were lifted to him and Angy, twenty-nine pairs of lips were smiling at them. To the end of his days Abraham remembered those smiles. Reassuring, unselfish, and tender, they made the old man's heart swell, his emotions go warring together.

He wondered, was grateful, yet he grew more confused and afraid. He stared amazed at Angeline, who seemed the embodiment of self-possession, lifting her dainty, proud little gray head higher and higher. She turned to Abraham with a protecting, motherly little gesture of command for him to follow, and marched gallantly on down the stairs. Humbly, trembling at the knees, he came with gingerly steps after the little old wife. How unworthy he was of her now! How unworthy he had always been, yet never realized to the full until this moment. He knew what those smiles meant, he told himself, watching the uplifted faces; they were to soothe his sense of shame and humiliation, to touch with rose this dull gray color of

the culmination of his failures. He passed his hand over his eyes, fiercely praying that the tears might not come to add to his disgrace.

And all the while brave little Angy kept smiling, until with a truly glad leap of the heart she caught sight of a blue ribbon painted in gold shining on the breast of each one of the twenty-nine women. A pale blue ribbon painted in gold with—yes, peering her eyes she discovered that it was the word "WELCOME!" The forced smile vanished from Angeline's face. Her eyes grew wet, her cheek white. Her proud figure shrank. She turned and looked back at her husband. Not for one instant did she appropriate the compliment to herself. "This is for *you!*" her spirit called out to him, while

a new pride dawned in her working face.

Forty years had she spent apologizing for Abraham, and now she understood how these twenty-nine generous old hearts had raised him to the pedestal of a hero, while she stood a heroine beside him. Angy it was who trembled now, and Abe, gaining a manly courage from that, took hold of her arm to steady her—they had paused on a step near the foot of the stairs—and, looking around with his whimsical smile, he demanded of the bedecked company in general, "Ladies, be yew 'spectin' the President?"

Cackle went the cracked old voices of the twenty-nine in a chorus of appreciative laughter, while the old heads bobbed at one another as if to say,

"Won't he be an acquisition?" And then, from among the group there came forward Blossy—Blossy, who had sacrificed most that this should come to pass; Blossy, who had sat till midnight painting the gold-and-blue ribbons; Blossy, the pride and beauty of the Home, in a delicate, old, yellow, real lace gown. She held her two hands gracefully and mysteriously behind her back as she advanced to the foot of the stairs. Looking steadily into Abraham's eyes, she kept a-smiling until he felt as if the warmth of a belated spring had beamed upon him.

"The President!" Her mellow, well-modulated voice shook, and she laughed with a mingling of generous joy and tender pity. "Are we expect-

ing the President? You dear modest man! We are welcoming—*you!*"

Abe looked to Angy as if to say, "How shall I take it?" and behold! the miracle of his wife's bosom swelling and swelling with pride in him. He turned back, for Blossy was making a speech. His hand to his head, he bent his good ear to listen. In terms poetical and touching she described the loneliness of the life at the Home as it had been with no man under the roof of the house and only a deaf-and-dumb gardener, who hated her sex, in the barn. Then in contrast she painted life as it must be for the sisters now that the thirty tender vines had found a stanch old oak for their clinging. "Me?" queried Abraham of himself and, with another silent glance, of Angy.

But what was this? Blossy, leading all the others in a resounding call of "Welcome!" and then Blossy drawing her two hands from behind her back. One held a huge blue cup, the other, the saucer to match. She placed the cup in the saucer and held it out to Abraham. He trudged down the few steps to receive it, unashamed now of the tears that coursed down his cheeks. With a burst of delight he perceived that it was a mustache cup, such as the one he had always used at home until it had been set for safe-keeping on the top pantry shelf to await the auction, where it had brought the price of eleven cents with half a paper of tacks thrown in.

And now as the tears cleared away he saw also, what Angy's eyes had al-

ready noted, the inscription in warm crimson letters on the shining blue side of the cup, "To Our Beloved Brother."

"Sisters," he mumbled, for he could do no more than mumble as he took his gift, "ef yew 'd been gittin' ready fer me six months, yew could n't have done no better."

## V

### THE HEAD OF THE CORNER

EVERYBODY wore their company manners to the breakfast-table—the first time in the whole history of the Home when company manners had graced the initial meal of the day. Being pleasant at supper was easy enough, Aunt Nancy used to say, for every one save the unreasonably cantankerous, and being agreeable at dinner was not especially difficult; but no one short of a saint could be expected to smile of mornings until sufficient time had been given to discover

whether one had stepped out on the wrong or the right side of the bed.

This morning, however, no time was needed to demonstrate that everybody in the place had gotten out on the happy side of his couch. Even the deaf-and-dumb gardener had untwisted his surly temper, and as Abraham entered the dining-room, looked in at the east window with a conciliatory grin and nod which said as plainly as words:

"'T is a welcome sight indeed to see one of my own kind around this establishment!"

"Why don't he come in?" questioned Abe, waving back a greeting as well as he could with the treasured cup in one of his hands and the saucer in the other; whereupon Sarah Jane, that

ugly duckling, explained that the fellow, being a confirmed woman-hater, cooked all his own meals in the smokehouse, and insisted upon all his orders being left on a slate outside the toolhouse door. Abe sniffed disdainfully, contemplating her homely countenance, over which this morning's mood had cast a not unlovely, transforming glow.

"Why, the scalawag!" He frowned so at the face in the window that it immediately disappeared. "Yew don't mean ter tell me he 's sot ag'in' yew gals? He must be crazy! Sech a handsome, clever set o' women I never did see!"

Sarah Jane blushed to the roots of her thin, straight hair and sat down, suddenly disarmed of every porcupine

quill that she had hidden under her wings; while there was an agreeable little stir among the sisters.

"Set deown, all hands! Set deown!" enjoined Miss Abigail, fluttering about with the heaviness of a fat goose. "Brother Abe,—that 's what we 've all agreed to call yew, by unanimous vote,—yew set right here at the foot of the table. Aunt Nancy always had the head an' me the foot; but I only kept the foot, partly becuz thar wa'n't no man fer the place, an' partly becuz I was tew sizable ter squeeze in anywhar else. Seein' as Sister Angy is sech a leetle mite, though, I guess she kin easy make room fer me t' other side o' her."

Abe could only bow his thanks as he put his gift down on the table and took

the prominent place assigned to him. The others seated, there was a solemn moment of waiting with bowed heads. Aunt Nancy's trembling voice arose, —the voice which had jealously guarded the right of saying grace at table in the Old Ladies' Home for twenty years,—not, however, in the customary words of thanksgiving, but in a peremptory "Brother Abe!"

Abraham looked up. Could she possibly mean that he was to establish himself as the head of the household by repeating grace? "Brother Abe!" she called upon him again. "Yew 've askt a blessin' fer one woman fer many a year; supposin' neow yew ask it fer thirty!"

Amid the amazement of the other sisters, Abe mumbled, and muttered,

and murmured—no one knew what words; but all understood the overwhelming gratitude behind his incoherency, and all joined heartily in the Amen. Then, while Mrs. Homan, the cook of the week, went bustling out into the kitchen, Aunt Nancy felt that it devolved upon her to explain her action. It would never do, she thought, for her to gain a reputation for self-effacement and sweetness of disposition at her time of life.

"Son, I want yew ter understand one thing naow at the start. Yew treat us right, an' we 'll treat yew right. That 's all we ask o' vew. Miss Ellie. pass the radishes."

"I 'll do my best," Abe hastened to assure her. "Hy-guy, that coffee smells some kind o' good, don't it? Between

the smell o' the stuff an' the looks o' my cup, it 'll be so temptin' that I 'll wish I had the neck of a gi-raffe, an' could taste it all the way deown. Angy, I be afraid we 'll git the gout a-livin' so high. Look at this here cream!"

Smiling, appreciative, his lips insisting upon joking to cover the natural feeling of embarrassment incident to this first meal among the sisters, but with his voice breaking now and again with emotion, while from time to time he had to steal his handkerchief to his old eyes, Abe passed successfully through the—to him—elaborate breakfast. And Angy sat in rapt silence, but with her face shining so that her quiet was the stillness of eloquence. Once Abe startled them all by rising stealthily from the table and seizing

the morning's newspaper which lay upon the buffet.

"I knowed it!" caviled Lazy Daisy *sotto voce* to no one in particular. "He could n't wait for the news till he was through eatin'!" But Abe had folded the paper into a stout weapon, and, creeping toward the window, despatched by a quick, adroit movement a fly which had alighted upon the screen.

"I hate the very sight o' them air pesky critters," he explained half apologetically. "Thar, thar 's another one," and slaughtered that.

"My, but yew kin git 'em, can't yew?" spoke Miss Abigail admiringly. "Them tew be the very ones I tried ter ketch all day yiste'day; I kin see as a fly-ketcher yew be a-goin' ter be wuth

a farm ter me. Set deown an' try some o' this here strawberry presarve."

But Abe protested that he could not eat another bite unless he should get up and run around the house to "joggle deown" what he had already swallowed. He leaned back in his chair and surveyed the family: on his right, generous-hearted Blossy, who had been smiling approval and encouragement at him all through the repast; at his left, and just beyond Angy, Miss Abigail indulging in what remained on the dishes now that she discovered the others to have finished; Aunt Nancy keenly watching him from the head of the board; and all the other sisters "betwixt an' between."

He caught Mrs. Homan's eye where she stood in the doorway leading into

the kitchen, and remarked pleasantly:

"Ma'am, yew oughter set up a pan-cake shop in 'York. Yew could make a fortune at it. I hain't had sech a meal o' vittles sence I turned fifty year o' age."

A flattered smile overspread Mrs. Homan's visage, and the other sisters, noting it, wondered how long it would be before she showed her claws in Abraham's presence.

"Hy-guy, Angy," Abe went on, "yew can't believe nothin' yew hear, kin yer? Why, folks have told me that yew ladies— What yew hittin' my foot fer, Mother? Folks have told me," a twinkle of amusement in his eye at the absurdity, "that yew fight among yerselves like cats an' dogs, when, law! I never see sech a clever

lot o' women gathered tergether in all my life. An' I believe—Mother, I hain't a-sayin' nothin'! I jest want ter let 'em know what I think on 'em. I believe that thar must be three hunderd hearts in this here place 'stid o' thirty. But dew yew know, gals, folks outside even go so fur 's ter say that yew throw plates at one another!"

There was a moment's silence; then a little gasp first from one and then from another of the group. Every one looked at Mrs. Homan, and from Mrs. Homan to Sarah Jane. Mrs. Homan tightened her grip on the pancake turner; Sarah Jane uneasily moved her long fingers within reach of a sturdy little red-and-white pepper-pot. Another moment passed, in which the air seemed filled with the promise of

an electric storm. Then Blossy spoke hurriedly—Blossy the tactician, clasping her hands together and bringing Abe's attention to herself.

"Really! You surprise me! You don't mean to say that folks talk about us like that!"

"Slander is a dretful long-legged critter," amended Miss Abigail, smiling and sighing in the same breath.

"Sary Jane," inquired Mrs. Homan sweetly, "what 's the matter with that pepper-pot? Does it need fillin'?"

And so began the reign of peace in the Old Ladies' Home.

# VI

## INDIAN SUMMER

MISS ABIGAIL had not banked in vain on the "foresightedness of the Lord." At the end of six months, instead of there being a shortage in her accounts because of Abe's presence, she was able to show the directors such a balance-sheet as excelled all her previous commendable records.

"How do you explain it?" they asked her.

"We cast our bread on the waters," she answered, "an' Providence jest kept a-handin' out the loaves." Again

she said, " 'T was grinnin' that done it. Brother Abe he kept the gardener good-natured, an' the gardener he jest grinned at the garden sass until it was ashamed not ter flourish; an' Brother Abe kept the gals good-natured an' they wa'n't so *niasy* about what they eat; an' he kept the visitors a-laughin' jest ter see him here, an' when yew make folks laugh they want ter turn around an' dew somethin' fer yew. I tell yew, ef yew kin only keep grit ernough ter grin, yew kin drive away a drought."

In truth, there had been no drought in the garden that summer, but almost a double yield of corn and beans; no drought in the gifts sent to the Home, but showers of plenty. Some of these came in the form of fresh fish and

clams left at the back door; some in luscious fruits; some in barrels of clothing. And the barrels of clothing solved another problem; for no longer did their contents consist solely of articles of feminine attire. "Biled shirts" poured out of them; socks and breeches, derby hats, coats and negligées; until Aunt Nancy with a humorous twist to her thin lips inquired if there were thirty men in this establishment and one woman.

"I never thought I 'd come to wearin' a quilted silk basque with tossels on it," Abe remarked one day on being urged to try on a handsome smoking-jacket. "Dew I look like one of them sissy-boys, er jest a dude?"

"It 's dretful becoming," insisted Angy, "bewtiful! Ain't it, gals?"

Every old lady nodded her head with an air of proud proprietorship, as if to say, "Nothing could fail to become *our* brother." And Angy nodded her head, too, in delighted approval of their appreciation of "our brother" and "my husband."

Beautiful, joy-steeped, pleasure-filled days these were for the couple, who had been cramped for life's smallest necessities so many meager years. Angy felt that she had been made miraculously young by the birth of this new Abraham—almost as if at last she had been given the son for whom in her youth she had prayed with impassioned appeal. Her old-wife love became rejuvenated into a curious mixture of proud mother-love and young-wife leaning, as she saw Abe

win every heart and become the center of the community.

"Why, the sisters all think the sun rises an' sets in him," Angy would whisper to herself sometimes, awed by the glorious wonder of it all.

The sisters fairly vied with one another to see how much each could do for the one man among them. Their own preferences and prejudices were magnanimously thrust aside. In a body they besought their guest to smoke as freely in the house as out of doors. Miss Abigail even traded some of her garden produce for tobacco, while Miss Ellie made the old gentleman a tobacco-pouch of red flannel so generous in its proportions that on a pinch it could be used as a chest-protector.

Then Ruby Lee, not to be outdone by anybody, produced, from no one ever discovered where, a mother-of-pearl manicure set for the delight and mystification of the hero; and even Lazy Daisy went so far as to cut some red and yellow tissue-paper into squares under the delusion that some time, somehow, she would find the energy to roll these into spills for the lighting of Abe's pipe. And each and every sister from time to time contributed some gift or suggestion to her "brother's" comfort.

It "plagued" the others, however, to see that none of them could get ahead of Blossy in their noble endeavors to make Abraham feel himself a light and welcome burden. She it was who discovered that Abe's contentment could

not be absolute without griddle-cakes for breakfast three hundred and sixty-five times a year; she it was who first baked him little saucer-cakes and pies because he was partial to edges; and Blossy it was who made out a list of "Don'ts" for the sisters to follow in their treatment of this grown-up, young-old boy.

"Don't scold him when he leaves the doors open. Don't tell him to wipe his feet. Don't ever mention gold-mines or shiftless husbands," etc., etc.

All these triumphs of Blossy's intuition served naturally to spur the others on to do even more for Brother Abe than they had already done, until the old man began to worry for fear that he should "git sp'ilt." When he lay down for his afternoon nap and

the house was dull and quiet without his waking presence, the ladies would gather in groups outside his door as if in a king's antechamber, waiting for him to awaken, saying to one another ever and again, "Sh, sh!" He professed to scoff at the attentions he received, would grunt and growl "Humbug!" yet nevertheless he thrived in this latter-day sunlight. His old bones took on flesh. His aged kindly face, all seamed with care as it had been, filled out, the wrinkles turning into twinkles. Abraham had grown young again. With the return of his youth came the spirit of youth to the Old Ladies' Home. Verily, verily, as Blossy had avowed from the first, they had been in sore need of the masculine presence. The ancient coat and hat

which had hung in the hall so long had perhaps served its purpose in keeping the burglars away, but this lifeless substitute had not prevented the crabbed gnomes of loneliness and discontent from stealing in. Spinster, wife, and widow, they had every one been warped by the testy just-so-ness of the old maid.

Now, instead of fretful discussions of health and food, recriminations and wrangling, there came to be laughter and good-humored chatter all the day long, each sister striving with all her strength to preserve the new-found harmony of the Home. There were musical evenings, when Miss Abigail opened the melodeon and played "Old Hundred," and Abraham was encouraged to pick out with one stiff fore-

finger "My Grandfather's Clock." "Hymn tunes" were sung in chorus; and then, in answer to Abe's appeal for something livelier, there came time-tried ditties and old, old love-songs. And at last, one night, after leaving the instrument silent, mute in the corner of the parlor for many years, Aunt Nancy Smith dragged out her harp, and, seating herself, reached out her knotted, trembling hands and brought forth what seemed the very echo, so faint and faltering it was, of "Douglas, Douglas, Tender and True."

There was a long silence after she had finished, her head bowed on her chest, her hands dropped to her sides. Abraham spoke first, clearing his throat before he could make the words come.

"I wish I could git a husband fer every one of yer," said he.

And no one was angry, and no one laughed; for they all knew that he was only seeking to express the message conveyed by Nancy's playing—the message of Love, Love triumphant, which cannot age, which over the years and over Death itself always hath the victory.

## VII

### OLD LETTERS AND NEW

BLOSSY left the room without a word, and went stealing up the stairs to the little cupboard where she now slept, and where was hung on the wall, in a frame of yellow hollyhocks, painted by her own hand, a photograph of Captain Samuel Darby, the man who had remained obstinately devoted to her since her days of pinafores.

The picture betrayed that Captain Darby wore a wig designed for a larger man, and that the visage beneath was gnarled and weather-beaten,

marked with the signs of a stubborn and unreasonable will.

Even now the aged belle could hear him saying: "Here I be, come eround ter pop ag'in. Ready ter hitch?"

Samuel's inelegant English had always been a source of distress to Blossy; yet still she stared long at the picture.

Six months had passed since his last visit; to-morrow would be the date of his winter advent.

Should she give the old unvarying answer to his tireless formula?

She glanced around the tiny room. Ashamed though she was to admit it even to herself, she missed that ample and cozy chamber which she had so freely surrendered to Abraham and his wife. She missed it, as she felt

they must crave their very own fireside; and the thought that they missed the old homestead made her yearn for the home that she might have had—the home that she still might have.

Again she brought her eyes back to the portrait; and now she saw, not the characteristics which had always made it seem impossible for her and Samuel to jog together down life's road, but the great truth that the face was honest and wholesome, while the eyes looked back into hers with the promise of an unswerving care and affection.

The next morning found Blossy kneeling before a plump, little, leather-bound, time-worn trunk which she kept under the eaves of the kitchen chamber. The trunk was packed hard with bundles of old letters. Some her

younger fingers had tied with violet ribbon; some they had bound with pink; others she had fastened together with white silk cord; and there were more and more bundles, both slim and stout, which Blossy had distinguished by some special hue of ribbon in the long ago, each tint marking a different suitor's missives.

To her still sentimental eye the colors remained unfaded, and each would bring to her mind instantly the picture of the writer as he had been in the golden days. But save to Blossy's eye alone there were no longer any rainbow tints in the little, old trunk; for every ribbon and every cord had faded into that musty, yellow brown which is dyed by the passing of many years.

Abraham discovered her there, too

engrossed in the perusal of one of the old letters to have heeded his creaking steps upon the stairs.

"Did n't see yer, till I 'most stumbled on yer," he began apologetically. "I come fer the apple-picker. Thar 's a handful of russets in the orchard yit, that 's calc'latin' ter spend Christmas up close ter heaven; but— Say, Blossy," he added more loudly, since she did not raise her head, "yew seen anythin' o' that air picker?"

Blossy glanced up from her ragged-edged crackly *billet-doux* with a start, and dropped the envelop to the floor.

For the moment, so deep in reminiscence was she, she thought Captain Darby himself had surprised her; then, recognizing Abe and recalling that Samuel's winter visits were invariably

paid in the afternoon, she broke into a shamefaced laugh.

"Oh, is that you, Brother Abe? Don't tell the others what you found me doing. These," with a wave of her delicate, blue-veined hands over the trunk and its contents, "are all old love-letters of mine. Do you think I 'm a silly old goose to keep them cluttering around so long?"

"Wa'al,"—Abe with an equally deprecatory gesture indicated Angy's horsehair trunk in the far corner of the loft,—"yew ain't no more foolisher, I guess, over yer old trash 'n me an' Angy be a-keepin' that air minin' stock of mine. One lot is wuth 'bout as much as t' other."

Recovering the envelop that she had dropped, he squinted at the superscrip-

tion. "Not meanin' ter be inquisitive or personal, Sister Blossy," a teasing twinkle appearing in his eye, "but this looks dretful familitary, this here handwritin' does. When I run the beach—yew 've heard me tell of the time I was on the Life-savin' Crew over ter Bleak Hill fer a spell—my cap'n he had a fist jest like that. Useter make out the spickest, spannest reports. Lemme see," the twinkle deepening, "did n't the gals say yew was a 'spectin' somebody ter-day? Law, I ain't saw Cap'n Sam'l fer ten year or more. I guess on these here poppin' trips o' his'n he hain't wastin' time on no men-folks. But, Blossy, yew better give me a chance ter talk to him this arternoon, an' mebbe I 'll speak a good word fer yer."

Blossy, not always keen to see a joke, and with her vanity now in the ascendant, felt the color rise into her withered cheek.

"Oh, you need n't take the trouble to speak a good word for me. Any man who could ever write a letter like this does n't need to be coaxed. Just listen:

"The man you take for a mate is the luckiest dog in the whole round world. I 'd rather be him than king of all the countries on earth. I 'd rather be him than strike a gold-mine reaching from here to China. I 'd rather be him than master of the finest vessel that ever sailed blue water. That 's what I would. Why, the man who could n't be happy with you would spill tears all over heaven."

Blossy's cheek was still flushed, but no longer with pique. Her voice quav-

ered, and broke; and finally there fell upon the faded page of the letter two sparkling tears.

Abraham shuffled uncomfortably from one foot to the other; then, muttering something about the "pesky apple-hook," went scuffing across the floor in the direction of the chimney.

Blossy, however, called him back. "I was crying, Brother Abe, because the man I did take for a mate once was not happy, and—and neither was I. I was utterly wretched; so that I 've always felt I never cared to marry again. And—and Samuel's wig is always slipping down over one eye, and I simply cannot endure that trick he has of carrying his head to one side, as if he had a left-handed spell of the mumps. It nearly drives me frantic.

"Brother Abe, now tell me honestly: do you think he would make a good husband?"

Abe cleared his throat. Blossy was in earnest. Blossy could not be laughed at. She was his friend, and Angy's friend; and she had come to him as to a brother for advice. He too had known Samuel as man to man, which was more than any of the sisters could say.

Stroking his beard thoughtfully, therefore, he seated himself upon a convenient wooden chest, while Blossy slipped her old love-letter in and out of the envelop, with that essentially feminine manner of weighing and considering.

"Naow," began Abe at length, "this is somep'n that requires keerful de-

batin'. Fust off, haowsomever, yew must remember that wigs an' ways never made a man yit. Ez I riccollec' Sam'l, he was pooty good ez men go. I should say he would n't be any more of a risk tew yew than I was tew Angy; mebbe less. He 's got quite a leetle laid by, I understand, an' a tidy story-an'-a-half house, an' front stoop, an', by golly, can't he cook! He 's a splendid housekeeper."

"Housewifery," remarked Blossy sagely, as she began to gather her missives together, "is an accomplishment to be scorned in a young husband, but not in an old one. They say there has n't been a woman inside Samuel's house since he built it, but it 's as clean as soap and sand can make it."

"I bet yer," agreed Abe. "Hain't



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never been no fly inside it, neither, I warrant yer. Fly can't light arter Sam'l's cleanin' up nohaow; he 's got ter skate."

"He says he built that little house for me," said the old lady, as she closed down the lid of the trunk. There was a wistful note in Blossy's voice, which made Abraham declare with a burst of sympathy:

"'T ain't no disgrace ter git married at no time of life. Sam'l 's a good pervider; why don't yew snap him up ter-day? We 'll miss yew a lot; but—"

"Here 's the apple-picker right over your head," interrupted Blossy tartly, and Abe felt himself peremptorily dismissed.

Scarcely had he left the attic, how-

ever, than she too hastened down the steep, narrow stairs. She spent the remaining hours before train-time in donning her beautiful lace gown, and in making the woman within it as young and ravishing as possible. And lovely, indeed, Blossy looked this day, with a natural flush of excitement on her cheek, a new sparkle in her bright, dark eyes, and with her white hair arranged in a fashion which might have excited a young girl's envy.

The hour for the train came and went, and, lo! for the first time in the history of twenty years Captain Darby did not appear.

Blossy pretended to be relieved, protesting that she was delighted to find that she would now have an extra hour in which to ponder the question. But

the second train came and went, and still no Captain Darby.

All the afternoon long Blossy wore her lace gown, thinking although there were no more trains from the eastward that day, that Samuel would still find his way to her. He might drive, as he usually did in June, or he might even walk from his home at Twin Coves, she said.

At night, however, she was obliged to admit that he could not be coming; and then, quivering with honest anxiety for her old friend, Blossy dipped into her emergency fund, which she kept in the heart of a little pink china pig on a shelf in her room,—a pink china pig with a lid made of stiff black hair standing on edge in the middle of his back,—and sent a tele-

gram to Captain Darby, asking if he were sick.

The answer came back slowly by mail, to find Blossy on the verge of a nervous collapse, under the care of all the women in the house.

That letter Blossy never showed to Brother Abe, nor to any one else. Neither did she treasure it in the sentimental trunk beneath the attic eaves. The letter ran:

DEAR BETSY ANN: I never felt better in my life. Ain't been sick a minute. Just made up my mind I was a old fool, and was going to quit. If you change your intentions at any time, just drop me a postal.

As ever,

SAM'L DARBY, ESQ.

"This, Captain Darby, makes your rejection final," vowed Blossy to her-

self, as she tore the note into fragments and drowned them in the spirits of lavender with which the sisters had been seeking to soothe her distracted nerves.

## VIII

### THE ANNIVERSARY

ABOUT this time Blossy developed a tendency to draw Brother Abraham aside at every opportunity, convenient or inconvenient, in order to put such questions as these to him:

"Did you say it is fully thirty-five years since you and Captain Darby were on the beach together? Do you think he has grown much older? Had he lost his hair then? Did he care for the opposite sex? Was he very brave —or would you say more brave than stubborn and contrary? Is n't it a blessing that I never married him?"

Fearful of the ridicule of the sisters, Blossy was always careful to conduct these inquiries in whispers, or at least in undertones with a great observance of secrecy, sometimes stopping Abe on the stairs, sometimes beckoning him to her side when she was busy about her household tasks on the pretense of requiring his assistance. On one occasion she even went so far as to inveigle him into holding a skein of wool about his clumsy hands, while she wound the violet worsted into a ball, and delicately inquired if he believed Samuel spoke the truth when he had protested that he had never paid court to any other woman.

Alas, Blossy's frequent tête-à-têtes with the amused but sometimes impatient Abraham started an exceedingly

foolish suspicion. When, asked the sisters of one another, did Abe ever help any one, save Blossy, shell dried beans or pick over prunes? When had he ever been known to hold wool for Angy's winding? Not once since wooing-time, I warrant you. What could this continual hobnobbing and going off into corners mean, except—flirtation?

Ruby Lee whispered it first into Aunt Nancy's good ear. Aunt Nancy indulged in four pinches of snuff in rapid succession, sneezed an amazing number of times, and then acridly informed Ruby Lee that she was a "jealous cat" and always had been one.

However, Aunt Nancy could not refrain from carrying the gossip to Miss Ellie, adding that she herself had been

suspicious of Abe's behavior from the start.

"Oh, no, no!" cried the shocked and shrinking spinster. "And Angy so cheerful all the time? I don't believe it."

But whisper, whisper, buzz, buzz, went the gossip, until finally it reached the pink little ears at the side of Miss Abigail's generously proportioned head. The pink ears turned crimson, likewise the adjoining cheeks, and Miss Abigail panted with righteous indignation.

"It all comes of this plagued old winter-time," she declared, sharply biting her thread, for she was mending a table-cloth. "Shet the winders on summer, an' yew ketch the tail of slander in the latch every time. Naow, ef

I hear one word about this 'tarnal foolishness comin' to Angy's ears, or Brother Abe's, or Blossy's either, fer that matter, we 'll all have to eat off 'n oil-cloth Sundays, the same as week-days, until I see a more Christian sperit in the house."

She gave the Sunday damask across her lap a pat which showed she was in earnest; and the rebuked sisters glanced at one another, as if to say:

"Suppose the minister should walk in some Sabbath afternoon and find oil-cloth on the table, and ask the reason why?"

They one and all determined to take Aunt Nancy's advice and "sew a button on their lips."

Fortunately, too, the February thaws had already set in, and the re-

mainder of the winter passed without any severe strain on the "buttonholes." And at length the welcome spring began to peep forth, calling to the old folks, "Come out, and grow young with the young year!"

With the bursting forth of the new springtide the winter's talk seemed to drop as a withered and dead oak-leaf falls from its winter-bound branches; and Abe stood once more alive to the blessings of renewed approval.

Angy went out of doors with Miss Abigail, and puttered around among the flowers as if they were her own, thanking God for Abe's increasing popularity in the same breath that she gave thanks for the new buds of the spring.

The anniversary of the Roses' en-

trance into the Home drew nearer, and Blossy suggested that the best way to celebrate the event would be by means of a "pink tea."

Neither Angy nor Abe, nor in fact half the sisters, had any clear conception of what a tinted function might be; but they one and all seized upon Blossy's idea as if it were a veritable inspiration, and for the time jealousies were forgotten, misunderstandings erased.

Such preparations as were made for that tea! The deaf-and-dumb gardener was sent with a detachment of small boys to fetch from the wayside and meadows armfuls of wild roses for the decorations. Miss Abigail made pink icing for the cake. Ruby Lee hung bleeding-hearts over the

dining-room door. Aunt Nancy resurrected from the bottom of her trunk a white lace cap with a rakish-looking pink bow for an adornment, and fastened it to her scant gray hairs in honor of the occasion. Blossy turned her pink china pig, his lid left up-stairs, into a sugar-bowl.

Pink, pink, pink, everywhere; even in Angy's proud cheeks! Pink, and pink, and pink! Abe used to grow dizzy afterward, trying to recall the various pink articles which graced that tea.

But most delightful surprise of all was his anniversary gift, which was slyly slipped to his place after the discussion of the rose-colored strawberry gelatin. It was a square, five-pound parcel wrapped in pink tissue-paper, tied with pink string, and found to con-

tain so much Virginia tobacco, which Blossy had inveigled an old Southern admirer into sending her for "charitable purposes."

After the presentation of this valuable gift, Abraham felt that the time had come for him to make a speech—practically his maiden speech.

He said at the beginning, more suavely at his ease than he would have believed possible, secure of sympathy and approbation, with Angy's glowing old eyes upon her prodigy, that all the while he had been at the Home, he had never before felt the power to express his gratitude for the welcome which had been accorded him—the welcome which seemed to wear and wear, as if it were all wool and a yard wide, and could never wear out.

The old ladies nodded their heads in approval of this, every face beaming; but as the speech went on the others perceived that Abe had singled out Blossy for special mention,—blind, blind Abraham!—Blossy, who had first proposed admitting him into this paradise; Blossy, who had given up her sunny south chamber to his comfort and Angy's; Blossy, who had been as a "guardeen angel" to him; Blossy, who as a fitting climax to all her sisterly attentions had given him to-day this wonderful, wonderful pink tea, and "this five hull pound o' Virginny terbaccer."

He held the parcel close to his bosom, and went on, still praising Blossy,—this innocent old gentleman,—heedless of Angy's gentle tug at his

coat-tail; while Blossy buried her absurdly lovely old face in the pink flush of a wild-rose spray, and the other old ladies stared from him to her, their faces growing hard and cold.

When Abraham sat down, aglow with pride over his oratorical triumphs, his chest expanded, his countenance wrinkled into a thousand guileless, grateful smiles, there was absolute silence.

Then Blossy, her head still bowed as if in shy confusion, began to clap her hands daintily together, whereat a few of the others joined her half-heartedly. A sense of chill crept over Abraham. Accustomed as a rule to deferential attention, did he but say good-morning, by no means aware that his throne had toppled during the winter, he was

still forced to perceive that something had gone amiss.

As always when aught troubled his mind, "Father" turned to Angy; but instead of his composed and resourceful little wife he found a scared-faced and trembling woman. Angy had suddenly become conscious of the shadow of the green-eyed monster. Angy's loyal heart was crying out to her mate: "Don't git the sisters daown on yer, Abe, 'cuz then, mebbe, yew 'll lose yer hum!" But poor Angeline's lips were so stiff with terror over the prospect of the County House for her husband, that she could not persuade them to speech.

Abraham, completely at sea, turned next to her whom he had called his guardian angel; but Blossy was rising

from her seat, a baffling smile of expectancy on her face, the rose spray swinging in her delicate hand as if to the measure of some music too far back in youth for any one else to hear. Blossy had worn that expectant look all day. She might have been delightedly hugging to herself a secret which she had not shared even with the trusted Abraham. She was gowned in her yellow lace, the beauty and grace of which had defied the changing fashions as Blossy's remarkable elegance of appearance had defied the passing of the years.

"Brother Abe,"—in her heedlessness of the mischief she had wrought, Blossy seemed almost to sing,—"I never shall forget your speech as long as I live. Will you excuse me now?"

She swept out of the door, her skirts rustling behind her.

Abe collected himself so far as to bow in the direction she had taken; then with lamblike eyes of inquiry met the exasperated glances cast upon him.

Not a sister moved or spoke. They all sat as if glued to their chairs, in a silence that was fast growing appalling.

Abe turned his head and looked behind his chair for an explanation; but nothing met his eye, save the familiar picture on the wall of two white kittens playing in the midst of a huge bunch of purple lilacs.

Then there broke upon the stillness the quavering old voice of Aunt Nancy, from her place opposite Abe's at the head of the board. The aged

dame had her two hands clasped before her on the edge of the table, vainly trying to steady their palsied shaking. Her eyes, bright, piercing, age-defying, she fixed upon the bewildered Abraham with a look of deep and sorrowful reproach. Her unsteady head bobbed backward and forward with many an accusing nod, and the cap with its rakish pink bow bobbed backward and forward too. Abe watched her, fascinated, unconsciously wondering, even in the midst of his disquietude, why the cap did not slide off her bald scalp entirely. To his amazement, she addressed not himself, but Angy.

"Sister Rose, yew kin leave the room." Implacable purpose spoke in Aunt Nancy's tone. Angy started,

looked up, going first red and then white; but she did not move. She opened her lips to speak.

"I don't want ter hear a word from yew, nor anybody else," sternly interposed Aunt Nancy. "I 'm old enough ter be yer mother. Go up-stairs!"

Angy's glance sought Miss Abigail, but the matron's eyes avoided hers. The little wife sighed, rose reluctantly, dropped her hand doubtfully reassuring on Abe's shoulder, and then went obediently to the door.

From the threshold she looked wistfully back; but an imperious wave from Aunt Nancy banished her altogether, and Abe found himself alone —not with the sisters whom he loved, but with twenty-eight hard-visaged strangers.

## IX

### A WINTER BUTTERFLY

"CAP'N ROSE," began Aunt Nancy. Brother Abe pricked up his ears at the formal address. "Cap'n Rose," she repeated, deliberately dwelling on the title. "I never believe in callin' a man tew account in front of his wife. It gives him somebody handy ter blame things on tew jest like ole Adam. Naow, look a-here! What I want is ter ask yew jest one question: Whar, whar on 'arth kin we look fer a decent behavin' ole man ef not in a Old Ladies' Hum? Would yew—" she ex-

horted earnestly, pointing her crooked forefinger at him. "Would yew—"

Abraham caught his breath. Beads of sweat had appeared on his brow. He broke in huskily:

"Wait a minute, Aunt Nancy. Jest tell me what I 've been an' done."

The ladies glanced at one another, contemptuous, incredulous smiles on their faces, while Aunt Nancy almost wept at his deceitfulness.

"Cap'n Rose," she vowed mournfully, "I 've lived in this house fer many, many years, an' all the while I been here I never hearn tell o' a breath o' scandal ag'in' the place until yew come an' commenced ter kick up yer heels."

Lazy Daisy, who had long been an inmate, also nodded her unwieldy head

in confirmation, while a low murmur of assent arose from the others. Abraham could only pass his hand over his brow, uneasily shuffle his maligned heels over the floor and await further developments; for he did not have the slightest conception as to "what they were driving at."

"Cap'n Rose," the matriarch proceeded, as in the earnestness of her indignation she arose, trembling, in her seat and stood with her palsied and shaking hands on the board, "Cap'n Rose, yer conduct with this here Mis' Betsey Ann Blossom has been somethin' *ree*diculous! It 's been disgraceful!"

Aunt Nancy sat down, incongruously disreputable in appearance, her pink bow having slipped down over

her right ear during the harangue. Over the culprit's countenance light had dawned, but, shame to tell! it was a light not wholly remorseful. Then silent laughter shook the old man's shoulders, and then—could it be?—there crept about his lips and eyes a smile of superbly masculine conceit. The sisters were fighting over him. Would n't Mother be amused when he should tell her what all this fuss was about.

Now, kindly, short-sighted Miss Abigail determined that it was time for the matron's voice to be heard.

"Of course, Brother Abe, we understand perfectly that yew never stopped ter take inter consideration haow susceptible some folks is made."

There being plain evidence from

Abe's blank expression that he did not understand the meaning of the word, Ruby Lee hastened to explain.

"Susceptible is the same as flighty-headed. Blossy allers was a fool over anything that wore breeches."

Abe pushed his chair back from the table and crossed his legs comfortably. For him all the chill had gone out of the air. Suppose that there was something in this? An old, old devil of vanity came back to the aged husband's heart. He recalled that he had been somewhat of a beau before he learned the joy of loving Angy. More than one Long Island lassie had thrown herself at his head. Of course Blossy would "get over" this; and Angy knew that his heart was hers as much as it had been the day he purchased his

wedding-beaver; but Abe could not refrain from a chuckle of complacent amusement as he stroked his beard.

His very evident hardness of heart so horrified the old ladies that they all began to attack him at once.

"Seems ter me I 'd have the decency ter show some shame!" grimly avowed Sarah Jane.

Abe could not help it. He sputtered. Even Miss Abigail's, "Yew were a stranger an' we took yew in" did not sober him.

"Ef any one o' my husbands had acted the way you 've acted, Abe Rose," began Mrs. Homan.

"Poor leetle Angy," broke in the gentle Miss Ellie pityingly. "She must 'a' lost six pounds."

Abraham's mobile face clouded over.

"Angy?" he faltered. "Yew don't mean that Angy—" Silence again fell on the group, while every glance was fastened on Abraham. "See here," he flashed his faded blue eye, "Angy 's got more sense than that!"

No one answered, but there was a significant shrugging of shoulders and lifting of eyebrows. Abraham was distressed and concerned enough now. Rising from his place he besought the sisters:

"Yew don't think Angy's feelin's have been hurt—dew yew, gals?"

Their faces softened, their figures relaxed, the tide of feeling changed in Abraham's favor. Miss Ellie spoke very softly:

"Yew know that even 'the Lord thy God is a jealous God.' "

Abraham grasped the back of his chair for support, his figure growing limp with astonishment. "Mother, jealous of me?" he whispered to himself, the memory of all the years and all the great happenings of all the years coming back to him. "Mother jealous of me?" He remembered how he had once been tormented by jealousy in the long, the ever-so-long ago, and of a sudden he hastened into the hall and went half-running up the stairs. He took hold of the latch of his bedroom door. It did not open. The door was locked.

"Angy!" he called, a fear of he knew not what gripping at his heart. "Angy!" he repeated as she did not answer.

The little old wife had locked her-

self in out of very shame of the rare tears which had been brought to the surface by the sisters' cruel treatment of Abraham. When she heard his call she hastened to the blue wash-basin and began hurriedly to dab her eyes. He would be alarmed if he saw the traces of her weeping. Whatever had happened to him, for his sake she must face it valiantly. He called again. Again she did not answer, knowing that her voice would be full of the tell-tale tears. Abe waited. He heard the tramp of feet passing out of the dining-room into the hall. He heard Blossy emerge from her room at the end of the passage and go tripping down the stairs. The time to Angy, guiltily bathing her face, was short; the time to her anxious husband unac-

countably long. The sound of wheels driving up to the front door came to Abe's ears. Still Angy made him no response.

"Angy!" he raised his voice in piteous pleading. What mattered if the sisters gathered in the lower hall heard him? What mattered if the chance guest who had just arrived heard him also? He had his peace to make with his wife and he would make it. "Angy!"

She flung the door open hastily. The signs of the tears had not been obliterated, and her face was drawn and old. Straightway she put her hand on his arm and searched his face inquiringly.

"What did the gals say ter yew?" she whispered. "Abe, yew made a mistake when yew picked out Bl—"

"Poor leetle Mother!" he interrupted. "Poor leetle Mother!" a world of remorseful pity in his tone. "So yew been jealous of yer ole man?"

Angeline, astonished and indignant, withdrew her hand sharply, demanding to know if he had lost his senses; but the blinded old gentleman slipped his arm around her and, bending, brushed his lips against her cheek. "Thar, thar," he murmured soothingly, "I did n't mean no harm. I can't help it ef all the gals git stuck on me!"

Before Angy could make any reply, Blossy called to the couple softly but insistently from the foot of the stairs; and Angy, wrenching herself free, hastened down the steps, for once in her life glad to get away from Abe. He lost no time in following. No mat-

ter where Angy went, he would follow until all was well between her and him again.

But what was this? At the landing, Angy halted and so did Abe, for in the center of the sisters stood Blossy with her Sunday bonnet perched on her silver-gold hair and her white India shawl over her shoulders, and beside Blossy stood Captain Samuel Darby with a countenance exceedingly radiant, his hand clasped fast in that of the aged beauty.

"Oh, hurry, Sister Angy and Brother Abe!" called Blossy. "We were waiting for you, and I 've got some news for all my friends." She waited smilingly for them to join the others; then with a gesture which included every member of the household,

she proceeded: "The pink tea, I want you all to know, had a double significance, and first, of course, it was to celebrate the anniversary of Brother Abe's sojourn with us; but next it was my farewell to the Home." Here Blossy gurgled and gave the man at her right so coy a glance that Samuel's face flamed red and he hung his head lower to one side than usual, like a little boy that had been caught stealing apples. "I left the tea a trifle early—you must forgive me, Brother Abe, but I heard the train-whistle." Abe stood beside Angeline, rooted in astonishment, while Blossy continued to address him directly. "You gave Samuel so many good recommendations, dear brother, that when the time approached for his June visit, I felt that I simply

could not let him miss it as he did in December. Last year, on the day you entered, he was here through no desire of mine. To-day he is here at my request. My friends," again she included the entire Home in her glance, "we 'll come back a little later to say Good-by. Now, we 're on the way to the minister's."

The pair, Samuel tongue-tied and bewildered by the joy of his finally won success, moved toward the door. On the threshold of the Home Blossy turned and waved farewell to the companions of her widowhood, while Samuel bowed in a dazed fashion, his face still as red as it was blissful. Then quickly the two passed out upon the porch. No one moved to see them off. Abe looked everywhere yet nowhere

at all. Not a word was spoken even when the carriage was heard rolling down the drive; but the sound of the wheels seemed to arouse Angy from her stupor of amazement; and presently Abraham became conscious of a touch,—a touch sympathetic, tender and true,—a touch all-understanding —the touch of Angy's hand within his own.

## X

### THE TURN OF THE TIDE

FROM time immemorial the history of the popular hero has ever been the same. To king and patriot, to the favorite girl at school and the small boy who is leader of the "gang," to politician, to preacher, to actor and author, comes first worship then eclipse. The great Napoleon did not escape this common fate; and the public idol who was kissed only yesterday for his gallant deeds is scorned to-day for having permitted the kissing. Oh, caprice of the human heart! Oh, cry of the race for the unaccustomed!

From that first anniversary of his entrance into the Home, Abraham felt his popularity decrease—in fact more than decrease. He saw the weather-vane go square about, and where he had known for three hundred and sixty-five days the gentle, balmy feel of the southwest zephyr, he found himself standing of a sudden in a cold, bleak northeast wind. The change bewildered the old man, and reacted on his disposition. As he had blossomed in the sunshine, so now he began to droop in the shade. Feeling that he was suspected and criticized, he began to grow suspicious and fault-finding himself. His old notion that he had no right to take a woman's place in the Institution came back to his brain, and he would brood over it for hours at a

time, sitting out on the porch with his pipe and Angy.

The old wife grieved to think that Father was growing old and beginning to show his years. She made him some tansy tea, but neither her persuasions nor those of the whole household could induce him to take it. He had never liked "doctoring" anyway, although he had submitted to it more or less during the past year in unconscious subservience to his desire to increase his popularity; but now he fancied that where once he had been served as a king by all these female attendants, he was simply being "pestered" as a punishment for his past behavior with Blossy. Ah, with its surprising ending that had been a humiliating affair; and he felt too that he would be long in for-

giving Mrs. Darby for not having confided to him her actual intentions. Now he was afraid to be decently courteous to one of the sisters for fear that they might accuse him of light dalliance again; and he scarcely ever addressed the new member who came to take Blossy's little room, for he had been cut to the quick by her look of astonishment when she was told that he belonged there.

In his mental ferment the old man began to nag at Angy. Sad though it is to confess of a hero honestly loved, Abraham had nagged a little all his married life when things went wrong. And Angeline, fretted and nervous, herself worried almost sick over Father's condition, was guilty once in a while out of the depths of her anxi-

ety of nagging back again. So do we hurt those whom we love best as we would and could hurt no other.

"I told yer I never could stand it here amongst all these dratted women-folks," Abe would declare. "It 's all your fault that I did n't go to the poor-house in peace."

"I notice yew did n't raise no objections until yew 'd lived here a year," Angy would retort; but ignoring this remark, he would go on:

"It 's 'Brother Abe' this an' 'Brother Abe' that! as ef I had thirty wives a-pesterin' me instid of one. I can't kill a fly but it 's 'Brother Abe, lemme bury him fer yew.' Do yer all think I be a baby?" demanded the old gentleman with glaring eye. "I guess I 'm able ter do somethin' fer myself

once in a while. I hain't so old as some folks might think," he continued with superb inconsistence. "I be a mere child compared with that air plagued Nancy Smith."

It took very little to exhaust Angy's ability for this style of repartee, and she would rejoin with tender but mistaken efforts to soothe and comfort him:

"Thar, thar, Father! don't git excited neow. Seems ter me ye 're a leetle bit feverish. Ef only yew 'd take this here tansy tea."

Abraham would give one exasperated glance at the tin cup and mutter into the depths of his beard:

"Tansy tea an' old women! Old women an' tansy tea! Tansy tea be durned!"

Abe failed perceptibly during the

summer, grew feebler as the autumn winds blew in, and by November he took to his bed and the physician of the Home, a little whiffet of a pompous idiot, was called to attend him. The doctor, determined at the start to make a severe case of the old man's affliction in order that he might have the greater glory in the end, be it good or bad, looked very grave over Abraham's tongue and pulse, prescribed medicine for every half-hour, and laid especial stress upon the necessity of keeping the patient in bed.

"Humbug!" growled the secretly terrified invalid, and in an excess of bravado took his black silk necktie from where it hung on the bedpost and tied it in a bow-knot around the collar of his pink-striped nightshirt, so that

he would be in proper shape to receive any of the sisters. Then he lay very still, his eyes closed, as they came tiptoeing in and out. Their tongues were on gentle tiptoe too, although not so gentle but that he could hear them advising: one, a "good, stiff mustard plaster"; one, an "onion poultice"; another, a "Spanish blister"; while Aunt Nancy stopped short of nothing less than "old-fashioned bleeding." Abe lay very still and wondered if they meant to kill him. He was probably going to die anyhow, so why torment him. Only when he was dead, he hoped that they would think more kindly of him. And so surrounded yet alone, the old man fought his secret terror until mercifully he went to sleep.

When he awoke there were the sisters again; and day after day they spent their combined efforts in keeping him on his back and forcing him to take his medicine, the only appreciable good resulting therefrom being the fact that with this tax upon their devotion the old ladies came once more to regard Abe as the most precious possession of the Home.

"What ef he should die?" they whispered among themselves, repentant enough of their late condemnation of him and already desolate at the thought of his leaving this little haven with them for the "great haven" over there; and the whisper reaching the sick-room, Abe's fever would rise, while he could never lift his lashes except to see the specter of helpless old age on one

side of the bed and death upon the other.

"What 's the matter with me?" he demanded of the doctor, as one who would say: "Pooh! pooh! You 're a humbug! What do you mean by keeping me in bed?" Yet the old man was trembling with that inner fear. The physician, a feminine kind of a bearded creature himself, took Abe's hand in his—an engaging trick he had with the old ladies.

"Now, my friend, do not distress yourself. Of course, you are a very sick man; I cannot deceive you as to that; but during my professional career, I have seen some remarkable cases of recovery and—"

"But what 's the matter with me?" broke in Abe, by this time fairly white

with fear. The doctor had assured him that all his organs were sound, so he could only conclude that he must have one of those unusual diseases such as Miss Abigail was reading about in the paper yesterday. Maybe, although his legs were so thin to-day, he was on the verge of an attack of elephantiasis!

"What 's the matter with me?" he repeated, his eyes growing wilder and wilder.

What the doctor really replied would be difficult to tell; but out of the confusion of his technicalities Abe caught the words, "nerves" and "hysteria."

"Mother, yew hear that?" he cried. "I got narvous hysterics. I told yer somethin' would happen ter me a-comin' to this here place. All them old

woman's diseases is ketchin'. Why on 'arth did n't yer let me go to the poor-house?"

He fell back on the pillow and drew the bedclothes up to his ears, while Angy followed the doctor out into the hall to receive, as Abe supposed, a more detailed description of his malady. He felt too weak, however, to question Angy when she returned, and stubbornly kept his eyes closed until he heard Mrs. Homan tiptoe into the room to announce in hushed tones that Blossy and Samuel Darby were below, and Samuel wanted to know if he might see the invalid.

Then Abe threw off the covers in a hurry and sat up. "Sam'l Darby?" he asked, the strength coming back into his voice. "A man! Nary a woman

ner a doctor! Yes—yes, show him up!"

Angy nodded in response to Mrs. Homan's glance of inquiry; for had not the doctor told her that it would not hasten the end to humor the patient in any reasonable whim? And she also consented to withdraw when Abe informed her that he wished to be left alone with his visitor, as it was so long since he had been face to face with a man "an' no petticoat a-hangin' 'round the corner."

"Naow, be keerful, Cap'n Darby," the little mother-wife cautioned at the door, "be very keerful. Don't stay tew long an' don't rile him up, fer he 's dretful excited, Abe is."

# XI

## MENTAL TREATMENT

LITTLE Samuel Darby paused at the foot of the bed and stared at Abe without saying a word, while Abe fixed his dim, distressed eyes on his visitor with a dumb appeal for assistance. Samuel looked a very different man from the old bachelor who used to come a-wooing every six months at the Home. Either marriage had brought him a new growth of hair, or else Blossy had selected a new wig for him—a modest, close, iron-gray which fitted his poll to perfection. Marriage or Blossy had also overcome in Samuel

that tendency to hang his head "to starb'd"; and now he lifted his bright eyes with the manner of one who would say:

"See! I 'm king of myself and my household! Behold what one woman has done for me!" And in turn Abe's unstrung vigor and feeble dependence cried out as loudly: "I have n't a leg left to stand on. Behold what too much woman has done for me!"

"Ain't yew a-goin' ter shake hands?" inquired Abraham at last, wondering at the long silence and the incomprehensible stare, his fears accentuated by this seeming indication of a supreme and hopeless pity. "Ain't yew a-goin' ter shake hands? Er be yew afeard of ketchin' it, tew?"

For a moment longer Samuel con-

tinued to stare, then of a sudden he roared, "Git up!"

"Huh?" queried Abe, not believing his own ears. "Why, Cap'n Sam'l, don't yew know that I 'm a doomed man? I got the 'narvous hysterics.' "

"Yew got the pip!" retorted Captain Darby contemptuously, and trotting quickly around to the side of the bed, he seized Abe by the shoulders and began to drag him out upon the floor, crying again, "Git up!"

The sick man could account for this remarkable behavior in no way except by concluding that his old captain had gone into senile dementia—oh, cruel, cruel afflictions that life brings to old folks when life is almost done! Well, thought Abe, he would rather be sick and die in his right mind than go

crazy. He began to whimper, whereupon Samuel threw him back upon his pillows in disgust.

"Cryin'! Oh, I swan, he 's cryin'!" Darby gave a short laugh pregnant with scorn. "Abe Rose, dew yew know what ails yew?" he demanded fixing his eyes fiercely upon the invalid. "Dew yew know what 'll happen tew yew ef yew don't git out o' this bed an' this here house? Either yer beard 'll fall out an' yew 'll dwindle deown ter the size o' a baby or yew 'll turn into a downright old woman—Aunt Abraham!—won't that sound nice? Or yew 'll die or yew 'll go crazy. *Git out er bed!*"

The patient shook his head and sank back, closing his eyes, more exhausted than ever. And he himself had heard

Angy warn this man in a whisper not to "rile him up!" Remorselessly went on the rejuvenated Darby:

"Hain't a-goin' ter git up, heh? Yew old mollycoddle! Yew baby! Old Lady 31! Kiffy calf! But I hain't a-blamin' yew; ef I had lived in this here place a year an' a half, I 'd be stark, starin' mad! Leetle tootsie-wootsie! *Git up!*"

Abe had opened his eyes and was once more staring at the other, his mind slowly coming to the light of the realization that Samuel might be more sane than himself.

"That 's what I told Angy all along," he ventured. "I told her, I says, says I, 'Humbug! Foolishness! Ye 're a-makin' a reg'lar baby of me. Why,' I says, 'what 's the difference between

me an' these here women-folks except that I wear a beard an' smoke a pipe?' "

"Then why don't yew git up?" demanded the inexorable Samuel. "Git up an' fool 'em; or, gosh-all-hemlock! they 'll be measurin' yew fer yer coffin next week. When I come inter the hall, what dew yew think these here sisters o' yourn was a-discussin'? They was a-arguin' the p'int as to whether they 'd bury yew in a shroud or yer Sunday suit."

Abraham put one foot out of bed. Samuel took hold of his arm and with this assistance the old man managed to get up entirely and stand, though shaking as if with the palsy, upon the floor.

"Feel pooty good, don't yew?" demanded Samuel, but with less severity.

"A leetle soft, a leetle soft," muttered the other. "Gimme my cane. Thar, ef one o' them women comes in the door I 'll—I 'll—" Abraham raised his stick and shook it at the innocent air. "Whar 's my pipe? Mis' Homan, she went an' hid it last week."

After some searching, Samuel found the pipe in Abe's hat-box underneath the old man's beaver, and produced from his own pocket a package of tobacco, whereupon the two sat down for a quiet smoke, Samuel chuckling to himself every now and again, Abe modestly seeking from time to time to cover his bare legs with the skirt of his pink-striped night-robe, not daring to reach for a blanket lest Samuel should call him names again. With the very first puff of his pipe, the light had

come back into the invalid's eyes; with the second, the ashen hue completely left his cheek; and when he had pulled the tenth time on the pipe, Abe was ready to laugh at the sisters, the whole world, and even himself.

"Hy-guy, but it 's splendid to feel like a man ag'in!"

The witch of Hawthorne's story never gazed more fondly at her "Feathertop" than Samuel now gazed at Abraham puffing away on his pipe; but he determined that Abraham's fate should not be as poor "Feathertop's." Abe must remain a man.

"Naow look a-here, Abe," he began after a while, laying his hand on the other's knee, "dew yew know that yew come put' nigh gittin' swamped in the big breakers? Ef I had n't come

along an' throwed out the life-line, yew—"

"Sam'l," interrupted the new Abraham, not without a touch of asperity, "whar yew been these six months? A-leavin' me ter die of apron-strings an' doctors! Of course I did n't 'spect nuthin' o' yew when yew was jist a bachelor, an' we 'd sort o' lost sight er each other fer many a year, but arter yew got connected with the Hum by marriage sorter—"

"Connected with the Hum by marriage!" broke in Samuel with a snort of indignant protest. "Me!" Words failed him. He stared at Abe with burning eyes, but Abe only insisted sullenly:

"Whar yew an' Blossy been all this time?"

"Dew yew mean ter tell me, Abe Rose, that yew did n't know that Aunt Nancy forbid Blossy the house 'cause she did n't go an' ask her permission ter git spliced? Oh, I fergot," he added. "Yew 'd gone up-stairs ter take a nap that day we come back from the minister's."

Abraham flushed. He did not care to recall Samuel's wedding-day. He hastened to ask the other what had decided him and Blossy to come to-day, and was informed that Miss Abigail had written to tell Blossy that if she ever expected to see her "Brother Abe" alive again, she must come over to Shoreville at the earliest possible moment.

"Then I says ter Blossy," concluded Captain Darby, "I says, says I, 'Jest

lemme see that air pore old hen-pecked Abe Rose. I 'll kill him er cure him!' I says. Here, yer pipe 's out. Light up ag'in!"

Abe struck the match with a trembling hand, unnerved once more by the speculation as to what might have happened had Samuel's treatment worked the other way.

"I left Blossy an' Aunt Nancy a-huggin' an' a-kissin' down-stairs."

Abe sighed: "Aunt Nancy allers was more bark than bite."

"Humph! Barkin' cats must be tryin' ter live with. Abe," he tapped the old man's knee again, "dew yew know what yew need? A leetle vacation, a change of air. Yew want ter cut loose from this all-fired old ladies' shebang an' go sky-larkin'." Abe hung

on Samuel's words, his eyes a-twinkle with anticipation. "Yes—yes, go sky-larkin'! Won't we make things hum?"

"Thar 's hummin' an' hummin'," objected Abe, with a sudden show of caution. "Miss Abigail thinks more o' wash-day than some folks does o' heaven. Wharabouts dew yew cak'late on a-goin'?"

"Tew Bleak Hill!"

Abraham's face lost its cautious look, his eyes sparkled once more. Go back to the Life-saving Station where he had worked in his lusty youth—back to the sound of the surf upon the shore, back to the pines and cedars of the Beach, out of the bondage of dry old lavender to the goodly fragrance of balsam and sea-salt! Back to active life among men!

"Men, men, nawthin' but men!" Samuel exploded as if he had read the other's thought. "Nawthin' but men fer a hull week, that 's my perscription fer yew! Haow dew yew feel naow, mate?"

For answer Abe made a quick spring out of his chair, and in his bare feet commenced to dance a gentle, rheumatic-toe-considering breakdown, crying, "Hy-guy, Cap'n Sam'l, you 've saved my life!" While Darby clapped his hands together, proud beyond measure at his success as the emancipator of his woman-ridden friend.

Neither heard the door open nor saw Angy standing on the threshold, half paralyzed with fear and amazement, thinking that she was witnessing the mad delirium of a dying man. until she

called out her husband's name. At the sound of her frightened voice, Abe stopped short and reached for the blanket with which to cover himself.

"Naow don't git skeered, Mother, don't git skeered," he abjured her. "I 'm all right in my head. Cap'n Sam'l here, he brung me some wonderful medicine. He—"

"Blossy said you did!" interrupted Angy, a light of intense gratitude flashing across her face as she turned eagerly to Darby. "Lemme see the bottle."

"I chucked it out o' the winder," affirmed Samuel without winking, and Abe hastened to draw Angy's attention back to himself.

"See, Mother, I kin stand as good

as anybody; hain't got no fever; I kin walk alone. Yew seen me dancin' jest naow, tew. An' ef I had that pesky leetle banty rooster of a doctor here, I 'd kick him all the way deown-stairs. Cap'n Sam'l 's wuth twenty-five o' him."

"Yew kept the perscription, did n't yer, cap'n?" demanded Angy. "Naow ef he should be took ag'in an'—"

Samuel turned away and coughed.

"Mother, Mother," cried Abe, "shet the door an' come set deown er all the sisters 'll come a-pilin' in. I 've had a invite, I have!"

Angy closed the door and came forward, her wary suspicious eye trailing from the visitor to her husband.

"Hy-guy, ain't it splendid!" Abe

burst forth. "Me an' Cap'n Sam'l here is a-goin' over ter Bleak Hill fer a week."

"Bleak Hill in December!" Angy cried, aghast. "Naow, see here, Father," resolutely, "medicine er no medicine—"

"He 's got ter git hardened up," firmly interposed Dr. Darby; "it 'll be the makin' o' him."

Angy turned on Samuel with ruffled feathers.

"He 'll freeze ter death. Yew shan't—"

Here Abe's stubborn will, so rarely set against Angy's gentle persistence, rose up in defiance:

"We 're a-gwine on a reg'lar A No. 1 spree with the boys, an' no women-folks is a-goin' ter stop us neither."

"When?" asked Angy faintly, feeling Abe's brow, but to her surprise finding it cool and healthy.

"Ter-morrer!" proclaimed Samuel; whereupon Abe looked a little dubious and lifted up his two feet, wrapped as they were in the blanket, to determine the present strength of his legs.

"Don't yer think yer 'd better make it day after ter-morrer?" he ventured.

"Or 'long erbout May er June?" Angy hastily amended.

Samuel gave an exasperated grunt.

"See here, whose spree is this?" Abe demanded of the little old wife.

She sighed, then resolved on strategy:

"Naow, Abe, ef yew be bound an' possessed ter go ter the Beach, yew go; but I 'm a-goin' a-visitin' tew, an'

I could n't git the pair o' us ready inside a week. I 'm a-goin' deown ter see Blossy. She ast me jist naow, pendin', she says, Cap'n Sam'l here cures Abe up ernough ter git him off. I thought she was crazy then."

Samuel knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the window-sill and arose to go.

"Waal," he said grudgingly, "make it a week from ter-day then, rain er shine, snow er blow, er a blizzard. Ef yer ever a-goin' ter git hardened, Abe, naow 's the time! I 'll drive over 'long erbout ten o'clock an' git somebody ter sail us from here; er ef the bay freezes over 'twixt naow an' then. ter take us in a scooter."

A "scooter," it may be explained, is an ice-boat peculiar to the Great South

Bay—a sort of modified dingy on runners.

"Yes—yes, a scooter," repeated Samuel, turning suddenly on Abe with the sharp inquiry: "Air yew a-shiverin'? Hain't, eh? Waal then, a week from ter-day, so be it!" he ended. "But me an' Blossy is a-comin' ter see yew off an' on pooty frequent meanstwhile; an', Abe, ef ever I ketch yew a-layin' abed, I 'll leave yew ter yer own destruction."

## XII

### "A PASSEL OF MEDDLERS"

ANGY'S secret hope that Abe would change his mind and abandon the projected trip to the Beach remained unfulfilled, in spite of the fact that cold weather suddenly descended on the South Side, and the bay became first "scummed" over with ice, and then frozen so solid that all its usual craft disappeared, and the "scooters" took possession of the field.

Abe and Samuel held stubbornly to their reckless intentions; and the sisters, sharing Angy's anxiety, grew solicitous almost to the point of active

interference. They withheld nothing in the way of counsel, criticism, or admonition which could be offered.

"Naow," said Mrs. Homan in her most commanding tones at the end of a final discussion in the big hall, on the evening before the date set for departure, "ef yew 're bound, bent, an' determined, Brother Abe, to run in the face of Providence, yew want tew mind one thing, an' wear yer best set of flannels ter-morrer."

"Sho, thar hain't no danger of me ketchin' cold," decried Abe.

"I did n't say yer thickest set of flannels; I said yer best. When a man gits throwed out onto the ice ker flump, the thickness of his clo'es ain't goin' to help him much. The fust thing I allus taught my husbands was to have

everything clean an' whole on, when thar was any likelihood of a sudden death."

"Yew 'spect me tew go an' prink up fer a sudden death?" thundered Abraham. "I hain't never heard tell on a scooter a-killin' nobody yit; it 's them plagued ice-boats up State what—"

"That 's all very well," persisted Mrs. Homan, not to be diverted from her subject; "but when old Dr. Billings got run over by the train at Mastic Crossin' on Fourth o' July eight year ago, his wife told me with her own lips that she never would git over it, cuz he had his hull big toe stickin' out o' the end of his stockin'. I tell yew, these days we 've got tew prepare fer a violent end."

The patient Angy somewhat tartly

retorted, that during the last week she had spent even more time upon Father's wardrobe than she had upon her own; while Abe inwardly rejoiced to think that for seven days to come—seven whole days—he and Angy would be free from the surveillance of the sisters.

Mrs. Homan, in no way nonplussed, boomed on:

"Thar, I most fergot about his necktie. 'Course, they don't dress up much at the Station; but jest the same that air tie o' yourn, Brother Abe, is a disgrace. I told yew yew 'd spile it a-wearin' it tew bed. Naow, I got a red an' green plaid what belonged to my second stepson, Henry O. He never would 'a' died o' pneumony, either, ef he 'd a-took my advice an' made him-

self a newspaper nightcap last time he substituted with the 'Savers. An' yew kin have that necktie jest as well as not. Naow, don't say a word; I 'm better able to part with it 'n yew be not to take it."

No one ever attempted the fruitless task of stopping Mrs. Homan once fully launched; but when at last she permitted her back to rest against her chair, folding her arms with the manner of one who makes a sacrifice in a worthy cause, Abe broke into an explosive protest.

If any one fretted him in his somewhat fretful convalescence, it was this grenadier member of the household, who since Blossy's marriage had endeavored to fill the vacant post of "guardeen angel."

"Mis' Homan," he sputtered, rising to his feet, "I would n't wear a red an' green plaid tie to a eel's funeral!"

Then with a somewhat ungracious "good-night" to the company in general, he trudged across the hall and up the stairs, muttering something to himself about a "passel of meddlers."

Well-meaning Miss Abigail, who had been nodding half asleep, roused herself to call after him, and he paused unwillingly to heed.

"Naow, don't yew lose no sleep ternight," she admonished, "a-worryin' erbout the change in yer vittles. I told Cap'n Sam'l that hardtack an' sech like would n't never do fer yer weak stummick, an' he promised me faithful he 'd send somebody tew the mainland every day fer milk."

"Dew yew think I be a baby?" shouted Abraham, turning on his heel. "I know now what makes my teeth so sore lately," mumbling to himself; "it 's from this here arrer-root an' all these puddin'y messes. They need hardenin', tew."

## XIII

### THE PRODIGAL'S DEPARTURE

ABRAHAM was up betimes in the morning to greet a day crisp and cold, quiet, yet with sufficient breeze stirring the evergreens in the yard outside to make him predict a speedy voyage.

The old man was nervous and excited, and, in spite of his buoyant anticipations, somewhat oppressed, now that the day had actually come, with a sense of timidity and fear. Still, he put on a bold face while Angeline fastened his refractory collar and tied his cravat.

This was neither Mrs. Homan's of-

fering nor Abe's own old, frayed tie, but a new black one which had mysteriously been thrust through the crack under the door during the night.

So, the last finishing touches having been put upon his toilet, and Angy having made ready by lamplight for her own trip, even before the old man was awake, there seemed nothing left to be done until the breakfast bell should ring.

Abe sat down, and looking hard at his open carpet-bag wondered audibly if they had "everythin' in." The last time they two had packed Abe's wardrobe for a visit to Bleak Hill had been many years ago, when Samuel Darby, though somewhat Abe's junior, was keeper of the Life-saving Station, and Abe was to be gone for a whole sea-

son's duty. Then all of his possessions had been stowed in a long, bolster-like canvas bag for the short voyage.

Both Angy and her husband recalled that time now—the occasion of their first, and almost of their last, real separation.

"A week 'll pass in no time," murmured Angy very quickly, with a catch in her voice. "Lookin' ahead, though, seven days seems awful long when yer old; but— Oh, law, yes; a week 'll pass in no time," she repeated. "Only dew be keerful, Abe, an' don't take cold."

She perched herself on her little horsehair trunk which she had packed to take to Blossy's, looking in her time-worn silk gown like a rusty blackbird,

and, like a bird, she bent her head first to one side and then the other, surveying Abe in his "barrel clothes" with a critical but complimentary eye.

"Wonder who made that necktie?" she questioned. "I 'll bet yer 't was Aunt Nancy; she 's got a sharp tongue, but a lot of silk pieces an' a tender spot in her heart fer yew, Abe. Ruby Lee says she never thought yew 'd bring her around; yew 're dretful takin' in yer ways, Father, thar 's no use a-talkin'."

Abraham glanced at himself in the glass, and pulled at his beard, his countenance not altogether free from a self-conscious vanity.

"I hain't sech a bad-lookin' feller when I 'm dressed up, be I, Mother? I dunno ez it 's so much fer folks ter

say I look like Abe Lincoln, after all; he was dretful humbly."

"Father," Angy said coaxingly, "why don't yer put some o' that air 'sweet stuff' Miss Abigail give yer on yer hair? She 'll feel real hurt ef she don't smell it on yer when yew go down-stairs."

Abe made a wry face, took up the tiny bottle of "Jockey Club," and rubbed a few drops on his hands. His hands would wash, and so he could find some way of removing the odor before he reached the station and—the men.

"I 'll be some glad ter git away from these here fussy old hens fer a spell," he grumbled, as he slammed the vial back on the bureau; but Angy looked so reproachful and grieved that he

felt ashamed of his ingratitude, and asked with more gentleness:

"Yew goin' ter miss me, Mother?"

Then the old wife was ashamed to find herself shaking of a sudden, and grown wretchedly afraid—afraid of the separation, afraid of the "hardening" process, afraid of she knew not what.

"I 'm glad 't ain't goin' ter be fer all winter this time," she said simply; then arose to open the door in order that he might not see the rush of tears to her foolish, old eyes.

According to the arrangement, Captain Darby was to drive over from Twin Coves with his hired man, and Ezra, after taking the two old men to the bay, was to return to the Home for Angy and her little trunk.

When Samuel drove up to the front door, he found Abe pacing the porch, his coat-collar turned up about his neck, his shabby fur cap pulled over his brow, his carpet-bag on the step, and, piled on the bench at the side of the door, an assortment of woolen articles fully six feet high, which afterward developed to be shawls, capes, hoods, comforters, wristlets, leggings, nubias, fascinators, guernseys, blankets, and coats.

Abe was fuming and indignant, scornful of the contributions, and vowing that, though the sisters might regard a scooter as a freight ocean-liner, he would carry nothing with him but what he wore and his carpet-bag.

"An' right yer be," pronounced Samuel, with a glance at the laden

bench and a shake of his head which said as plainly as words, "Brother, from what am I not delivering thee?"

The sisters came bustling out of the door, Mrs. Homan in the lead, Angy submerged in the crowd, and from that moment there was such a fuss, so much excitement, so many instructions and directions for the two adventurers, that Abraham found himself in the carriage before he had kissed Angy good-by.

He had shaken hands, perhaps not altogether graciously, with every one else, even with the deaf-and-dumb gardener who came out of his hiding-place to witness the setting-out. Being dared to by all the younger sisters, he had waggishly brushed his beard against Aunt Nancy Smith's cheek, and then

he had taken his place beside Samuel without a touch or word of parting to his wife.

He turned in his seat to wave to the group on the porch, his eyes resting in a sudden hunger upon Angeline's frail, slender figure, as he remembered. She knew that he had forgotten in the flurry of his leave-taking, and she would have hastened down the steps to stop the carriage; but all the old ladies were there to see, and she simply stood, and gazed after the vehicle as it rolled away slowly behind the jog trot of Samuel's safe, old calico-horse. She stood and looked, holding her chin very high, and trying to check its unsteadiness.

A sense of loneliness and desolation fell over the Home. Piece by piece

the sisters put away all the clothing they had offered in vain to Abe. They said that the house was already dull without his presence. Miss Abigail began to plan what she should have for dinner the day of his return.

No one seemed to notice Angy. She felt that her own departure would create scarcely a stir; for, without Abraham, she was only one of a group of poor, old women in a semi-charity home.

Slowly she started up the stairs for her bonnet and the old broché shawl. When she reached the landing, where lay the knitted mat of the three-star pattern, the matron called up to her in tragic tones:

"Angy Rose, I jest thought of it. He never kissed yew good-by!"

Angy turned, her small, slender feet sinking deep into one of the woolly stars, her slim figure encircled by the light from the upper hall window. She saw a dozen faces uplifted to her, and she answered with quiet dignity:

"Abe would n't think of kissin' me afore folks."

Then quickly she turned again, and went to her room—their room—where she seated herself at the window, and pressed her hand against her heart which hurt with a new, strange, unfamiliar pain, a pain that she could not have shown "afore folks."

## XIV

### CUTTING THE APRON-STRINGS

THE usual hardy pleasure-seekers that gather at the foot of Shore Lane whenever the bay becomes a field of ice and a field of sport as well were there to see the old men arrive, and as they stepped out of the carriage there came forward from among the group gathered about the fire on the beach the editor of the "Shoreville Herald."

Ever since his entrance into the Old Ladies' Home, Abe had never stopped chafing in secret over the fact that until he died, and no doubt received a worthy obituary, he might never again "have his name in the paper."

In former days the successive editors of the local sheet had been willing, nay, eager, to chronicle his doings and Angy's, whether Abe's old enemy, rheumatism, won a new victory over him or Angy's second cousin Ruth came from Riverhead to spend the day or—wonder indeed to relate!—the old man mended his roof or painted the front fence. No matter what happened of consequence to Captain and Mrs. Rose, Mr. Editor had always been zealous to retail the news—before the auction sale of their household effects marked the death of the old couple, and of Abe especially, to the social world of Shoreville. What man would care to read his name between the lines of such a news item as this?

The Old Ladies' Home is making preparations for its annual quilting bee. Donations of worsted, cotton batting, and linings will be gratefully received.

Mr. Editor touched his cap to the two old men. He was a keen-faced, boyish little man with a laugh bigger than himself, but he always wore a worried air the day before his paper, a weekly, went to press, and he wore that worried look now. Touching his hand to his fur cap, he informed Samuel and Abe that news was "as scarce as hens' teeth"; then added: "What 's doing?"

"Oh, nawthin', nawthin'," hastily replied Samuel, who believed that he hated publicity, as he gave Abe's foot a sly kick. "We was jest a-gwine ter take a leetle scooter sail." He adjusted

the skirt of his coat in an effort to hide Abe's carpet-bag, his own canvas satchel, and a huge market-basket of good things which Blossy had cooked for the life-savers. "Seen anythink of that air Eph Seaman?" Samuel added, shading his eyes with his hand and peering out upon the gleaming surface of the bay, over which the white sails of scooters were darting like a flock of huge, single-winged birds.

"Eph 's racing with Captain Bill Green," replied the newspaper man. "Captain Bill 's got an extra set of new runners at the side of his scooter and wants to test them. Say, boys," looking from one to the other of the old fellows, "so you 're going scootering, eh? Lively sport! Cold kind of

sport for men of your age. Do you know, I 've a good mind to run in to-morrow an article on 'Long Island and Longevity.' Taking head-line, eh? Captain Rose," turning to Abe as Samuel would do no more than glower at him, "to what do you attribute your good health at your time of life?"

Abe grinned all over his face and cleared his throat importantly, but before he could answer, Samuel growled:

"Ter me! His health an' his life both. I dragged him up out of a death-bed only a week ago."

The editor took out his note-book and began scribbling.

"What brought you so low, Captain Rose?" he inquired without glancing up. Again, before Abe could answer, Samuel trod on his toe.

"Thirty mollycoddling women-folks."

Abe found his voice and slammed the fist of one hand against the palm of the other.

"If you go an' put that in the paper, I 'll—I 'll—"

Words failed him. He could see the sisters fairly fighting for the possession of the "Shoreville Herald" to-morrow evening, as they always scrambled each for the first glance at the only copy taken at the Home, and he could hear one reading his name aloud—reading of the black ingratitude of their brother member.

"Jest say," he added eagerly, "that the time fer old folks ter stick home under the cellar-door has passed, an' nobody is tew old ter go a-gallivantin'

nowadays. An' then yew might mention"—the old man's face was shining now as he imagined Angy's pleasure—"that Mis' Rose is gone deown ter Twin Coves ter visit Mis' Sam'l Darby fer a week, an' Cap'n Darby an' Cap'n Abraham Rose," his breast swelling out, "is a-goin' ter spend a week at Bleak Hill. Thar, hain't that Cap'n Eph a-scootin' in naow? I guess them air new runners o' Bill Green's did n't work. He hain't nowhere in sight. He—"

"Le' 's be a-gwine, Abe," interrupted Samuel, and leaving the editor still scribbling, he led the way down the bank with a determined trudge, his market-basket in one hand, his grip in the other, and his lips muttering that "a feller could n't dew nuthin' in

Shoreville without gittin' his name in the paper." But a moment later, when the two were walking gingerly over the ice to the spot where Eph had drawn his scooter to a standstill, Samuel fell into a self-congratulatory chuckle.

"He did n't find out though that I had my reasons fer leavin' home tew. Women-folks, be it only one, hain't good all the time fer nobody. I come ter see Blossy twict a year afore we was married reg'lar; an' naow, I cak'late ter leave her twict a year fer a spell. A week onct every six months separate an' apart," proceeded the recently made benedict, "is what makes a man an' his wife learn haow ter put up with one another in between-times."

"Why, me an' Angy," began Abe,

"have lived tergether year in an' year out fer—"

"All aboard!" interrupted Captain Eph with a shout. "It 's a fair wind. I bet on making it in five minutes and fifty seconds!"

Seven minutes had been the record time for the five-mile sail over the ice to Bleak Hill, but Samuel and Abe, both vowing delightedly that the skipper could n't go too fast for them, stepped into the body of the boat and squatted down on the hard boards. They grinned at each other as the scooter started and Eph jumped aboard —grinned and waved to the people on the shore, their proud old thoughts crying:

"I guess folks will see now that we 're as young as we ever was!"

They continued to grin as the boat spun into full flight and went whizzing over the ice, whizzing and bumping and bouncing. Both their faces grew red, their two pairs of eyes began to water, their teeth began to chatter; but Samuel shouted at the top of his voice in defiance of the gale:

"Abe, we 've cut the apron-strings!"

"Hy-guy!" Abe shouted in return, his heart flying as fast as the sail, back to youth and manhood again, back to truant-days and the vacation-time of boyhood. "Hy-guy, Sam'l! Hain't we a-gwine ter have a reg'lar A No. 1 spree!"

## XV

### THE "HARDENING" PROCESS

THE Life-saving Station was very still. Nos. 3 and 5 had gone out on the eight-o'clock patrol. The seventh man was taking his twenty-four hours off at his home on the shore. The keeper was working over his report in the office. The other members of the crew were up-stairs asleep, and Abe and Samuel were bearing each other company in the mess-room.

Abe lay asleep on the carpet-covered sofa which had been dragged out of the captain's room for him, so that the old man need not spend the night in the cold sleeping-loft above. He was

fully dressed except for his boots; for he was determined to conform to the rules of the Service, and sleep with his clothes on ready for instant duty.

"Talk erbout him a-dyin'!" growled Samuel to himself, lounging wearily in a chair beside the stove. "He 's jest startin' his life. He 's a reg'lar hoss. I did n't think he had it in him."

Samuel's tone was resentful. He was a little jealous of the distinction which had been made between him and Abe; and drawing closer to the fire, he shivered in growing distaste for the cot assigned to him with the crew upstairs, where the white frost lay on the window-latches.

What uncomfortable chairs they had in this station! Samuel listened to the mooing of the breakers, to the wind

rattling at the casements,—and wondered if Blossy had missed him. About this time, she must be sitting in her chintz-covered rocker, combing out the ringlets of her golden-white hair in the cheery firelight.

Now, that would be a sight worth seeing! Abe opened his mouth and began to snore. What disgusting, hideous creatures men were, reflected Samuel. Six months' living with an unusually high-bred woman had insensibly raised his standards.

Why should he spend a week of his ever-shortening life with such inferior beings, just for Abraham's sake—for Abraham's sake, and to bear out a theory of his own, which he had already concluded a mistake?

Abe gave a snort, opened his eyes,

and muttered sleepily: "This is what I call a A No. 1 spree. Naow, ter-morrer—" But mumbling incoherently he relapsed into slumber, puffing his lips out into a whistling sound.

Samuel reached for a newspaper on the table, folded it into a missile, and started to fling it into the innocent face of the sleeper. But, fortunately for Abraham, it was Captain Darby's custom to count ten whenever seized by an exasperated impulse, and at the ninth number he regretfully dropped the paper.

Then he began to count in another way. Using the forefinger of his right hand as a marker, he counted under his breath, "one" on his left thumb, then after a frowning interval, "two" on his left forefinger, "three" on the

middle digit, and so on, giving time for thought to each number, until he had exhausted the fingers of his left hand and was ready to start on the right.

Count, count, went Samuel, until thrice five was passed, and he began to be confused.

Once more Abe awoke, and inquired if the other were trying to reckon the number of new wigwags and signals which the Service had acquired since they had worked for the government; but on being sharply told to "Shet up!" went to sleep again.

What the projector of the trip was really trying to recall was how many times that day he had regretted saving Abe from the devastating clutches of the old ladies.

"Him need hardenin'?" muttered Samuel blackly. "Why, he 's harder now 'n nails an' hardtack!"

Again he ran over on his fingers the list of high crimes and misdemeanors of which Abe had been guilty.

First,—thumb, left hand,—Abe had insisted on extending their scooter sail until he, Samuel, had felt his toes freezing in his boots.

Second,—forefinger, left hand,—on being welcomed by the entire force at Bleak Hill and asked how long they expected to stay, Abe had blurted out, "A hull week," explaining that Samuel's rule requiring at least seven days of exile from his wife every six months barred them from returning in less time.

The keeper was a widower, all the

other men bachelors. How could they be expected to understand? They burst into a guffaw of laughter, and Abe, not even conscious that he had betrayed a sacred confidence, sputtered and laughed with the rest.

Samuel had half a mind to return to-morrow, "jest to spite 'em." Let 's see, how many days of this plagued week were left? Six. Six whole twenty-four hours away from Blossy and his snug, warm, comfortable nest.

She was n't used to keepin' house by herself, neither. Would she remember to wind the clock on Thursday, and feed the canary, and water the abutilon and begonias reg'lar?

Grimly Samuel took up offense No. 3. Abraham had further told the men that he had been brought over here for

a hardening process; but he was willing to bet that if Samuel could keep up with him, he could keep up with Samuel.

Then followed offense on offense. Was Samuel to be outdone on his own one-time field of action by an old ladies' darling? No!

When Abe sat for a half-hour in the lookout, up in the freezing, cold cupola, and did duty "jest to be smart," Samuel sat there on top of his own feet, too.

When Abe helped drag out the apparatus-cart over the heavy sands for the drill, Samuel helped, too. And how tugging at that rope brought back his lumbago!

When Abe rode in the breeches-buoy, Samuel insisted on playing the

sole survivor of a shipwreck, too, and went climbing stiffly and lumberingly up the practice-mast.

Abraham refused to take a nap after dinner; so did Samuel. Abe went down to the out-door carpenter-shop in the grove, and planed a board just for the love of exertion. Samuel planed two boards and drove a nail.

"We 've got two schoolboys with us," said the keeper and the crew.

"Ef I 'd a-knowed that yew had more lives 'n my Maltese cat," Samuel was muttering over Abe by this time, "I 'd—"

Count, count went Captain Darby's fingers. He heard the keeper rattling papers in the office just across the threshold, heard him say he was about to turn in, and guessed Samuel had

better do likewise; but Samuel kept on counting.

Count, count went the arraigning fingers. Gradually he grew drowsy, but still he went over and over poor Abe's offenses, counting on until of a sudden he realized that he was no longer numbering the sins of his companion; he was measuring in minutes the time he must spend away from Blossy and Twin Coves, and the begonias, and the canary, and the cat.

What would Blossy say if she could feel the temperature of the room in which he was supposed to sleep? What would Blossy say if she knew how his back ached? Whatever would Blossy do to Abe Rose if she could suspect how he had tuckered out her "old man?"

"He 's a reg'lar hoss," brooded Sam-

uel. "Oh, my feet!" grabbing at his right boot. "I 'll bet yer all I got it 's them air chilblains. That 's what," he added, unconsciously speaking aloud.

Abe's lids slowly lifted. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. He turned his head on his hard, blue gingham-covered pillow, and stared sleepily at the other.

"Yew been noddin', Sam'l? Ain't gittin' sleepy a'ready, are yer?" He glanced at the clock. "Why, it 's only half past nine. Say, what 's the matter with me an' yew goin' west ter meet No. 5? Leetle breath o' fresh air 'll make us sleep splendid."

He started up from the couch, but dropped back, too heavy with weariness to carry off his bravado. Samuel, however, not noticing the discrepancy

between speech and action, was already at the door leading up-stairs.

"Yew don't drag me out o' this station ter-night, Abe Rose. Yew 're a reg'lar hoss; that 's what yew be. A reg'lar hoss! A reg'lar—a reg'lar—"

He flung open the door and went trudging as fast as his smarting feet could carry him up the steep and narrow steps, wherein the passing of other feet for many years had worn little hollows on either side.

Abraham limped from the couch to the door himself, and called after him:

"Sam'l, don't yew want tew sleep by the fire? Yew seem a leetle softer than I be. Let me come up-stairs."

There was no answer beyond the vicious slamming of Samuel's boots upon the floor above.

Abe raised his voice again, and now came in answer a roar of wrath from the cot next to Samuel's.

"Go to bed!" shouted No. 6, a burly, red-headed Irishman. "Go to bed, wid ye! Th' young folks do be nadin' a little schlape!"

## XVI

### "A REG'LAR HOSS"

ABE flung himself back on his hard couch, drew the thick, gray blanket over him, and straightway fell into a deep, childlike slumber from which he was aroused by the rough but hearty inquiry:

"Say, Cap, like to have some oyster-stew and a cup of coffee?"

Abe sat up, rubbing his eyes, wondering since when they had begun to serve oyster-stew for breakfast on the Beach; then he realized that he had not overslept, and that it was not morning.

The clock was striking twelve, the

midnight patrol was just going out, and the returning "runners" were bidding him partake of the food they had just prepared to cheer them after their cold tramp along the surf.

The old man whiffed the smell of the coffee, tempted, yet withheld by the thought of Angy's horror, and the horror of the twenty-nine sisters.

"Cap'n Abe"—Clarence Havens, No. 5, with a big iron spoon in his hand and a blue gingham apron tied around his bronzed neck, put him on his mettle, however—"Cap'n Abe, I tell yew, we would n't have waked no other fellow of your age out of a sound sleep. Cap'n Darby, he could snooze till doomsday; but we knowed you would n't want to miss no fun a-going."

"Cap'n Sam'l does show his years," Abe admitted. "Much obliged fer yew a-wakin' me up, boys," as he drew on his boots. "I was dreamin' I was hungry. Law, I wish I had a dollar apiece fer all the eyester-stews I 've et on this here table 'twixt sunset an' sunrise."

Under the stimulus of the unaccustomed repast, Abe expanded and began to tell yarns of the old days on the Beach—the good old days. His cheeks grew red, his eyes sparkled. He smoked and leaned back from the table, and ate and drank, smoked and ate again.

"A week amongst yew boys," he asserted gaily, "is a-goin' tew be the makin' of me. Haow Sam'l kin waste so much time in sleep, I can't understand."

"I don't think he is asleep," said No. 3. "When I was up-stairs jest now fer my slippers, I heard him kind o' sniffin' inter his piller."

The laugh which followed brought the keeper out of the office in his carpet slippers, a patchwork quilt over his shoulders. His quick eyes took in the scene—the lamp sputtering above the table, the empty dishes, the two members of the crew sleepily jocular, with their blue flannel elbows spread over the board, the old man's rumpled bed, and his brilliant cheeks and bright eyes.

"Boys, you should n't have woke up Cap'n Rose," he said reprovingly. "I 'm afraid, sir," turning to Abraham, "that you find our manners pretty rough after your life among the old ladies."

Abe dropped his eyes in confusion. Was he never to be rid of those apron-strings?

"Well, there 's worse things than good women," proceeded the captain. "I wish we had a few over here." He sighed with the quiet, dull manner of the men who have lived long on the Beach. "Since they made the rule that the men must eat and sleep in the station, it 's been pretty lonely. That 's why there 's so many young fellows in the Service nowadays; married men with families won't take the job."

"Them empty cottages out thar," admitted Abe, pointing to the window, "does look kind o' lonesome a-goin' ter rack an' ruin. Why, the winter I was over here, every man had his wife an'

young 'uns on the Beach, 'cept me an' Sam'l."

Again the keeper sighed, and drew his coverlid closer. "Now, it 's just men, men, nothing but men. Not a petticoat in five miles; and I tell you, sometimes we get mad looking at one another, don't we, boys?"

The two young men had sobered, and their faces also had taken on that look engendered by a life of dull routine among sand-hills at the edge of a lonely sea, with seldom the sound of a woman's voice in their ears or the prattle of little children.

"For two months last winter nobody came near us," said Havens, "and we could n't get off ourselves, either, half the time. The bay broke up into porridge-ice after that big storm around

New Year's; yew dasn't risk a scooter on it or a cat-boat. Feels to me," he added, as he rose to his feet, "as if it was blowin' up a genuwine old nor'-easter again."

The other man helped him clear the table. "I 'm goin' to get married in June," he said suddenly, "and give up this here blamed Service."

"A wife," pronounced Abe, carrying his own dishes into the kitchen, "is dretful handy, onct yew git used to her."

The keeper went into the office with a somewhat hurried "Good-night," and soon Abe found himself alone again, the light in the kitchen beyond, no sound in the room save that of the booming of the surf, the rattling of the windows, and now and again the fall of a clinker in the stove.

The old man was surprised to find that he could not fall back into that blissful slumber again. Not sleeping, he had to think. He thought and thought,—sober night thoughts,—while the oysters "laid like a log in his stummick" and the coffee seemed to stir his brain to greater activity.

"Suppose," said the intoxicated brain, "another big storm should swoop down upon you and the bay should break up, and you and Samuel should be imprisoned on the beach for two or three months with a handful of men-folks!"

"Moo! Moo!" roared the breakers on the shore. "Serve you right for finding fault with the sisters!"

Come to think of it, if he had not been so ungracious of Miss Abigail's

concern for him, he would now be in possession of a hop pillow to lull him back to sleep. Well, he had made his bed, and he would have to lie on it, although it was a hard old carpet-covered lounge. Having no hop pillow, he would count sheep—

One sheep going over the fence, two sheep, three— How tired he was! How his bones ached! It 's no use talking, you can't make an old dog do the tricks of his puppy days. What an idiot he had been to climb that practice-mast! If he had fallen and broken his leg?

Four sheep. Maybe he was too old for gallivanting, after all. Maybe he was too old for anything except just to be "mollycoddled" by thoughtful old ladies. Now, be honest with your-

self, Abe. Did you enjoy yourself to-day—no, yesterday? Did you? Well, yes and—no! Now, if Angy had been along!

Angy! That was why he could not go to sleep! He had forgotten to kiss her good-by! Wonder if she had noticed it? Wonder if she had missed him more on account of that neglect? Pshaw! What nonsense! Angy knew he wa'n't no hand at kissin', an' it was apt to give him rheumatism to bend down so far as her sweet old mouth.

He turned to the wall at the side of the narrow lounge, to the emptiness where her pillow should be. "Good-night, Mother," he muttered huskily. Mother did not answer for the first time in nights beyond the counting. Mother would not be there to answer

for at least six nights to come. A week, thought this old man, as the other old man had reflected a few hours before, is a long time when one has passed his threescore years and ten, and with each day sees the shadows growing longer.

Abraham put out his hard time-shrunken hand and touched in thought his wife's pillow, as if to persuade himself that she was really there in her place beside him. He remembered when first he had actually touched her pillow to convince himself that she was really there, too awed and too happy to believe that his youth's dream had come true; and he remembered now how his gentle, strong hand had crept along the linen until it cupped itself around her cheek; and he had

felt the cheek grow hot with blushes in the darkness. She had not been "Mother" then; she had been "Dearest!" Would she think that he was growing childish if he should call her "Dearest" now?

Smiling to himself, he concluded that he would try the effect of the tender term when he reached home again. He drew his hand back, whispering once more, "Good-night, Mother." Then he fancied he could hear her say in her soft, reassuring tone, "Good-night, Father." Father turned his back on the empty wall, praying with a sudden rush of passionate love that when the last call should come for him, it would be after he had said "Good-night, Mother," to Angy and after she had said "Good-night, Father," to him,

and that they might wake somewhere, somehow, together with God, saying, "Good-morning, Mother," "Good-morning, Father!" And "Fair is the day!"

## XVII

### THE DESERTER

AT dawn the Station was wide-awake and everybody out of bed. Samuel crept down-stairs in his stocking-feet, his boots in his hand, his eyes heavy with sleeplessness, and his wig awry. He shivered as he drew close to the fire, and asked in one breath for a prescription for chilblains and where might Abe be. Abe's lounge was empty and his blankets neatly folded upon it.

The sunrise patrol from the east, who had just returned, made reply

that he had met Captain Abe walking along the surf to get up an appetite for his griddle-cakes and salt pork. Samuel sat down suddenly on the lounge and opened his mouth.

"Did n't he have enough exercise yist'day, for marcy's sake! Put' nigh killed me. I was that tired las' night I could n't sleep a wink. I declar', ef 't wa'n't fer that fool newspaper a-comin' out ter-night, I 'd go home ter-day. Yer a-gwine acrost, hain't yer, Havens?"

Havens laughed in response. Samuel glowered at him.

"I want home comforts back," he vowed sullenly. "The Beach hain't what it used ter be. Goin' on a picnic with Abe Rose is like settin' yer teeth into a cast-iron stove lid covered

with a thin layer o' puddin'. I 'm a-goin' home."

The keeper assured him that no one would attempt to detain him if he found the Station uncomfortable, and that if he preferred to leave Abraham behind, the whole force would take pleasure in entertaining the more active old man.

"That old feller bates a phonograph," affirmed the Irishman. "It 's good ter hear that he 'll be left anyhow for comp'ny with this storm a-comin' up."

Samuel rushed to the window, for up-stairs the panes had been too frosty for him to see out. A storm coming up? The beach did look gray and desolate, dun-colored in the dull light of the early day, with the winter-killed grass

and the stunted green growth of cedar and holly and pine only making splotches of darkness under a gray sky which was filled with scurrying clouds. The wind, too, had risen during the night, and the increased roar of the surf was telling of foul weather at sea.

A storm threatening! And the pleasant prospect of being shut in at the beach with the cast-iron Abraham and these husky life-savers for the remainder of the winter! No doubt Abe would insist upon helping the men with the double duties imposed by thick weather, and drag Samuel out on patrol.

"When dew yew start, Havens?" demanded Samuel in shaking tones. "Le' 's get off afore Abe gits back an' tries ter hold me. He seems ter be so

plagued stuck on the life over here, he 'll think I must be tew."

But, though Havens had to wait for the return of the man who had gone off duty yesterday morning, still Abe had not put in an appearance when Samuel and the life-saver trudged down the trail through the woods to the bay. As he stepped into the scooter, Samuel's conscience at last began to prick him.

"Yew sure the men will look arter the old fellow well an' not let him overdew?"

But the whizz of the flight had already begun and the scooter's nose was set toward Twin Coves, her sail skimming swiftly with the ring of the steel against the ice over the shining surface of the bay.

"Law, yes," Samuel eased his conscience; "of course they will. They could n't hurt him, anyhow. I never seen nobody take so kindly ter hardenin' as that air Abe."

## XVIII

### SAMUEL'S WELCOME

THE shore at Twin Coves was a somewhat lonely spot, owing to stretches of marshland and a sweep of pine wood that reached almost to the edge of the water.

Samuel, however, having indicated that he wished to be landed at the foot of a path through the pines, found himself on the home shore scarcely ten minutes after he had left Bleak Hill—Havens already speeding toward his home some miles to the eastward, the bay seemingly deserted except for his sail, a high wind blowing, and the snow beginning to fall in scattered flakes.

Samuel picked up his grip, trudged through the heavy sand of the narrow beach, and entered the sweet-smelling pine wood. He was stiff with cold after the rough, swift voyage; his feet alone were hot—burning hot with chilblains. Away down in his heart he was uneasy lest some harm should come to Abe and the old man be caught in the approaching storm on the Beach. But, oh, was n't he glad to be home!

His house was still half a mile away; but he was once more on good, solid, dry land.

"I 'll tell Blossy haow that air Abe Rose behaved," he reassured himself, when he pictured his wife's astonished and perhaps reproachful greeting, "an' then she won't wonder that I had ter quit him an' come back."

He recollected that Angy would be there, and hoped fervently that she might not prove so strenuous a charge as Abraham. Moreover, he hoped that she would not so absorb Blossy's attention as to preclude a wifely ministering to his aching feet and the application of "St. Jerushy Ile" to his lame and sore back.

The torture of the feet and back made walking harder, too, than he had believed possible with the prospect of relief so near. As he limped along he was forced to pause every now and again and set down the carpet-bag, sometimes to rub his back, sometimes to seat himself on a stump and nurse for a few moments one of those demon-possessed feet. Could he have

made any progress at all if he had not known that at home, no matter if there was company, there would at least be no Abe Rose to keep him going, to spur him on to unwelcome action, to force him to prove himself out of sheer self-respect the equal, if not the superior, in masculine strength?

Abe had led him that chase over at the Station, Samuel was convinced, "a-purpose" to punish him for having so soundly berated him when he lay a-bed. That was all the thanks you ever got for doing things for "some folks."

Samuel hobbled onward, his brow knit with angry resentment. Did ever a half-mile seem so long, and had he actually been only twenty-three hours from home and Blossy? Oh, oh! his

back and his feet! Oh, the weight of that bag! How much he needed sleep! How good it would be to have Blossy tuck him under the covers, and give him a hot lemonade with a stick of ginger in it!

If only he had hold of Abe Rose now to tell him his opinion of him! Well, he reflected, you have to summer and winter with a person before you can know them. This one December day and night with Abe had been equal to the revelations of a dozen seasons. The next time Samuel tried to do good to anybody more than sixty-five, he 'd know it. The next time he was persuaded into leaving his wife for over night, he 'd know that, too. Various manuals for the young husband, which he had consulted, to the contrary not-

withstanding, the place for a married man was at home.

Samuel sat down on a fallen tree which marked the half-way point between his place and the bay. The last half of the journey would seem shorter, and, at the end, there would be Blossy smiling a welcome, for he never doubted but that Blossy would be glad to see him. She thought a good deal of him, nor had she been especially anxious for that week of separation.

His face smoothed its troubled frowns into a look of shining anticipation—the look that Samuel's face had worn when first he ushered Blossy into his tidy, little home and murmured huskily:

"Mis' Darby, yew 're master o' the vessel naow; I 'm jest fo'castle hand."

Forgetting all his aches, his pains, his resentments, Samuel took a peppermint-lozenge out of his pocket, rolled it under his tongue, and walked on. Presently, as he saw the light of the clearing through the trees, he broke into a run,—an old man's trot,—thus proving conclusively that his worry of lumbago and chilblains had been merely a wrongly diagnosed case of homesickness.

He grinned as he pictured Abe's dismay on returning to the Station to find him gone. Still, he reflected, maybe Abe would have a better time alone with the young fellows; he had grown so plagued young himself all of a sudden. Samuel surely need not worry about him.

More and more good-natured grew

Samuel's face, until a sociable rabbit, peeping at him from behind a bush, decided to run a race with the old gentleman, and hopped fearlessly out into the open.

"Ah, yew young rascal!" cried Samuel. "Yew 're the feller that eat up all my winter cabbages."

At this uncanny reading of his mind, Mr. Cottontail darted off into the woods again to seek out his mate and inform her that their guilt had been discovered.

Finally, Samuel came to the break in the woodland, an open field of rye, green as springtime grass, and his own exquisitely neat abode beckoning across the gray rail-fence to him.

How pretty Blossy's geraniums looked in the sitting-room windows!

Even at this distance, too, he could see that she had not forgotten to water his pet abutilon and begonias. How welcome in the midst of this flurry of snow—how welcome to his eye was that smoke coming out of the chimneys! All the distress of his trip away from home seemed worth while now for the joy of coming back.

Before he had taken down the fence-rail and turned into the path which led to his back door, he was straining his ears for the sound of Blossy's voice gossiping with Angy. Not hearing it, he hurried the faster.

The kitchen door was locked. The key was not under the mat; it was not in the safe on the porch, behind the stone pickle-pot. He tried the door again, and then peered in at the window.

Not even the cat could be discerned. The kitchen was set in order, the breakfast dishes put away, and there was no sign of any baking or preparations for dinner.

He knocked, knocked loudly. No answer. He went to a side door, to the front entrance, and found the whole house locked, and no key to be discovered. It was still early in the morning, earlier than Blossy would have been likely to set out upon an errand or to spend the day; and then, too, she was not one to risk her health in such chilly, damp weather, with every sign of a heavy storm.

Samuel became alarmed. He called sharply, "Blossy!" No answer. "Mis' Rose!" No answer. "Ezra!" And still no sound in reply.

His alarm increased. He went to the barn; that was locked and Ezra nowhere in sight. By standing on tip-toe, however, and peeping through a crack in the boards, he found that his horse and the two-seated surrey were missing.

"Waal, I never," grumbled Samuel, conscious once more of all his physical discomforts. "The minute my back 's turned, they go a-gallivantin'. I bet yer," he added after a moment's thought, "I bet yer it 's that air Angy Rose. She 's got ter git an' gad every second same as Abe, an' my poor wife has been drug along with her."

There was nothing left for him to do but seek refuge in his shop and await their return. Like nearly every other bayman, he had à one-room

shanty, which he called the "shop," and where he played at building boats, and weaving nets, and making oars and tongs

This structure stood to the north of the house, and fortunately had an old, discarded kitchen stove in it. There, if the wanderers had not taken that key also, he could build a fire, and stretch out before it on a bundle of sail-cloth.

He gave a start of surprise, however, as he approached the place; for surely that was smoke coming out of the chimney!

Ezra must have gone out with the horse, and Blossy must be entertaining Angy in some outlandish way demanded by the idiosyncrasies of the Rose temperament.

Samuel flung open the door, and strode in; but only to pause on the threshold, struck dumb. Blossy was not there, Angy was not there, nor any one belonging to the household. But sitting on that very bundle of canvas, stretching his lean hands over the stove, with Samuel's cat on his lap, was the "Old Hoss"—Abraham Rose!

## XIX

### EXCHANGING THE OLIVE-BRANCH

THE cat jumped off Abe's lap, running to Samuel with a mew of recognition. Abe turned his head, and made a startled ejaculation.

"Sam'l Darby," he said stubbornly, "ef yew 've come tew drag me back to that air Beach, yew 're wastin' time. I won't go!"

Samuel closed the door and hung his damp coat and cap over a suit of old oilskins. He came to the fire, taking off his mittens and blowing on his fingers, the suspicious and condemnatory tail of his eye on Abraham.

"Haow 'd yew git here?" he burst forth. "What yew bin an' done with my wife, an' my horse, an' my man, an' my kerridge? Haow 'd yew git here? What 'd yew come fer? When 'd yew git here?"

"What 'd yew come fer?" retorted Abe with some spirit. "Haow 'd yew git here?"

"None o' yer durn' business."

A glimmer of the old twinkle came back into Abe's eye, and he began to chuckle.

"I guess we might as waal tell the truth, Sam'l. We both tried to be so all-fired young yesterday that we got played out, an' concluded unanermous that the best place fer a A No. 1 spree was ter hum."

Samuel gave a weak smile, and

drawing up a stool took the cat upon his knee.

"Yes," he confessed grudgingly, "I found out fer one that I hain't no spring lamb."

"Ner me, nuther," Abe's old lips trembled. "I had eyester-stew an' drunk coffee in the middle o' the night; then the four-o'clock patrol wakes me up ag'in. 'Here, be a sport,' they says, an' sticks a piece o' hot mince-pie under my nose. Then I was so oneasy I could n't sleep. Daybreak I got up, an' went fer a walk ter limber up my belt, an' I sorter wandered over ter the bay side, an' not a mile out I see tew men with one o' them big fishin'-scooters a-haulin' in their net. An' I walked a ways out on the ice, a-signalin' with my bandana han'kercher; an' arter a

time they seen me. 'T was Cap'n Ely from Injun Head an' his boy. Haow them young 'uns dew grow! Las' time I see that kid, he wa' n't knee-high tew a grasshopper.

"Waal, I says tew 'em, I says: 'Want ter drop a passenger at Twin Coves?' 'Yes, yes,' they says. 'Jump in.' An' so, Sam'l, I gradooated from yer school o' hardenin' on top a ton o' squirmin' fish, more er less. I thought I 'd come an' git Angy," he ended with a sigh, "an' yer hired man 'd drive us back ter Shoreville; but thar wa' n't nobody hum but a mewin' cat, an' the only place I could git inter was this here shop. Wonder whar the gals has gone?"

No mention of the alarm that he must by this time have caused at the

Station. No consciousness of having committed any breach against the laws of hospitality. But there was that in the old man's face, in his worn and wistful look, which curbed Samuel's tongue and made him understand that as a little child misses his mother so Abe had missed Angy, and as a little homesick child comes running back to the place he knows best so Abe was hastening back to the shelter he had scorned.

So, with an effort, Samuel held his peace, merely resolving that as soon as he could get to a telephone he would inform their late hosts of Abe's safety.

There was no direct way of telephoning; but a message could be sent to the Quogue Station, and from there forwarded to Bleak Hill.

"I 've had my lesson," said Abe. "The place fer old folks is with old folks."

"But"—Samuel recovered his authoritative manner—"the place fer an old man ain't with old hens. Naow, Abe, ef yew think yew kin behave yerself an' not climb the flagpole or jump over the roof, I want yer to stay right here, yew an' Angy both, an' spend yer week out. Yes, yes," as Abe would have thanked him. "I take it," plunging his hand into his pocket, "yew ain't stowed away nothin' since that mince-pie; but I can't offer yer nothin' to eat till Blossy gits back an' opens up the house, 'cept these here pepp'mints. They 're fine; try 'em."

With one of those freakish turns of the weather that takes the conceit out

of all weather-prophets, the snow had now ceased to fall, the sun was struggling out of the clouds, and the wind was swinging around to the west.

Neither of the old men could longer fret about their wives being caught in a heavy snow; but, nevertheless, their anxiety concerning the whereabouts of the women did not cease, and the homesickness which Abe felt for Angy, and Samuel for Blossy, rather increased than diminished as one sat on the roll of canvas and the other crouched on his stool, and both hugged the fire, and both felt very old, and very lame, and very tired and sore.

Toward noontime they heard the welcome sound of wheels, and on rushing to the door saw Ezra driving alone to the barn. He did not note their ap-

pearance in the doorway of the shop; but they could see from the look on his face that nothing had gone amiss.

Samuel heard the shutting of the kitchen door, and knew that Blossy was at home, and a strange shyness submerged of a sudden his eagerness to see her.

What would she say to this unexpected return? Would she laugh at him, or be disappointed?

"Yew go fust," he urged Abe, "an' tell my wife that I 've got the chilblains an' lumbago so bad I can't hardly git tew the house, an' I had ter come hum fer my 'St. Jerushy Ile' an' her receipt fer frosted feet."

## XX

### THE FATTED CALF

ABE had no such qualms as Samuel. He wanted to see Angy that minute, and he did not care if she did know why he had returned.

He fairly ran to the back door under the grape arbor, so that Samuel, observing his gait, was seized with a fear that he might be that young Abe of the Beach, during his visit, after all.

Abraham rushed into the kitchen without stopping to knock. "I 'm back, Mother," he cried, as if that were all the joyful explanation needed.

She was struggling with the strings

of her bonnet before the looking-glass which adorned Blossy's parlor-kitchen. She turned to him with a little cry, and he saw that her face had changed marvelously—grown young, grown glad, grown soft and fresh with a new excited spirit of jubilant thanksgiving.

"Oh, Father! Were n't yew s'prised tew git the telephone? I knowed yew 'd come a-flyin' back."

Blossy appeared from the room beyond, and slipped past them, knowing intuitively where she would find her lord and master; but neither of them observed her entrance or her exit.

Angy clung to Abe, and Abe held her close. What had happened to her, the undemonstrative old wife? What made her so happy, and yet tremble so? Why did she cry, wetting his cheek

with her tears, when she was so palpably glad? Why had she telephoned for him, unless she, too, had missed him as he had missed her?

Recalling his memories of last night, the memories of that long-ago honeymoon-time, he murmured into his gray beard, "Dearest!"

She did not seem to think he was growing childish. She was not even surprised. At last she said, half between sobbing and laughing:

"Oh, Abe, ain't God been good to us? Ain't it jist bewtiful to be rich? Rich!" she cried. "Rich!"

Abe sat down suddenly, and covered his face with his hands. In a flash he understood, and he could not let even Angy see him in the light of the revelation.

"The minin' stock!" he muttered; and then low to himself, in an awed whisper: "Tenafly Gold! The minin' stock!"

After a while he recovered himself sufficiently to explain that he had not received the telephone message, and therefore knew nothing.

"Did I git a offer, Mother?"

"A offer of fifteen dollars a share. The letter come last night fer yew, an' I—"

"Fifteen dollars a share!" He was astounded. "An' we 've got five thousand shares! Fifteen dollars, an' I paid ninety cents! Angy, ef ever I ketch yew fishin' yer winter bunnit out of a charity barrel ag'in, I 'll— Fifteen dollars!"

"But that ain't the best of it," inter-

rupted Angy. "I could n't sleep a wink, an' Blossy says not ter send word tew yew, 'cuz mebbe 't was a joke, an' to wait till mornin' an' go see Sam'l's lawyer down ter Injun Head. That 's whar we 've jest come from, an' we telephoned ter Quogue Station from thar. An' the lawyer at fust he did n't 'pear tew think very much of it; but Blossy, she got him ter call up some broker feller in 'York, an' 'Gee whizz!' he says, turnin' 'round all excited from the 'phone. 'Tenafly Gold is sellin' fer twenty dollars on the Curb right this minute!' An' he says, says he: 'Yew git yer husband, an' bring that air stock over this arternoon; an',' says he, 'I 'll realize on it fer yer ter-morrer mornin'.' "

Abe stared at his wife, at her shin-

ing silk dress with its darns and careful patches, at her rough, worn hands, and at the much mended lace over her slender wrists.

"That mine was closed down eighteen years ago; they must 'a' opened it up ag'in"; he spoke dully, as one stunned. Then with a sudden burst of energy, his eyes still on his wife's figure: "Mother, that dress o' yourn is a disgrace fer the wife of a financierer. Yew better git a new silk fer yerself an' Miss Abigail, tew, fust thing. Her Sunday one hain't nothin' extry."

"But yer old beaver, Abe!" Angy protested. "It looks as ef it come out o' the Ark!"

"Last Sunday yew said it looked splendid"; his tone was absent-minded again. He seemed almost to ramble

in his speech. "We must see that Ishmael gits fixed up comfortable in the Old Men's Home; yew remember haow he offered us all his pennies that day we broke up housekeepin'. An' we must do somethin' handsome fer the Darbys, tew. Ef it had n't been fer Sam'l, I might be dead naow, an' never know nothin' erbout this here streak o' luck. Tenafly Gold," he continued to mutter. "They must 'a' struck a new lead. An' folks said I was a fool tew invest."

His face lightened. The weight of the shock passed. He threw off the awe of the glad news. He smiled the smile of a happy child.

"Naow, Mother, we kin buy back our old chair, the rocker with the red roses onto it. Seems ter me them roses

must 'a' knowed all the time that this was a-goin' ter happen. They was jest as pert an' sassy that last day—"

Angy laughed. She laughed softly and with unutterable pride in her husband.

"Why, Father, don't yer see yew kin buy back the old chair, an' the old place, too, an' then have plenty ter spare?"

"So we kin, Mother, so we kin"; he nodded his head, surprised. He plunged his hands into his pockets, as if expecting to find them filled with gold. "Wonder ef Sam'l would n't lend me a dollar or so in small change. Ef I only had somethin' ter jingle, mebbe I could git closer to this fac'." He drew her to him, and gave her waist a jovial squeeze. "Hy-guy,

Mother, we 're rich! Hain't it splendid?"

Their laughter rang out together—trembling, near-to-tears laughter. The old place, the old chair, the old way, and—plenty! Plenty to mend the shingles. Aye, plenty to rebuild the house, if they chose. Plenty with which to win back the smiles of Angy's garden. The dreadful dream of need, and lack, and want, of feeding at the hand of charity, was gone by.

Plenty! Ah, the goodness and greatness of God! Plenty! Abe wanted to cry it out from the housetops. He wanted all the world to hear. He wished that he might gather his wealth together and drop it piece by piece among the multitude. To give where he had been given, to blossom with

abundance where he had withered with penury!

The little wife read his thoughts. "We 'll save jest enough fer ourselves ter keep us in comfort the rest of our lives an' bury us decent."

They were quiet a long while, both sitting with bowed heads as if in prayer; but presently Angy raised her face with an exclamation of dismay:

"Don't it beat all, that it happened jest tew late ter git in this week's 'Shoreville Herald'!"

"Tew late?" exclaimed the new-fledged capitalist. "Thar hain't nothin' tew late fer a man with money. We 'll hire the editor tew git out another paper, fust thing ter-morrer!"

## XXI

### "OUR BELOVED BROTHER"

THE services of the "Shoreville Herald," however, were not required to spread the news. The happiest and proudest couple on Long Island saw their names with the story of their sudden accession to wealth in a great New York daily the very next morning.

A tall, old gentleman with a real "barber's hair-cut," a shining, new high hat, a suit of "store clothes" which fitted as if they had been made for him, a pair of fur gloves, and brand-

new ten-dollar boots; and a remarkably pretty, old lady in a violet bonnet, a long black velvet cape, with new shoes as well as new kid gloves, and a big silver-fox muff—this was the couple that found the paper spread out on the hall table at the Old Ladies' Home, with the sisters gathered around it, peering at it, weeping over it, laughing, both sorrowing and rejoicing.

"This 'll be good-by ter Brother Abe," Aunt Nancy had sniffed when the news came over the telephone the day before; and though Miss Abigail had assured her that she knew Abe would come to see them real often, the matriarch still failed to be consoled.

"Hain't you noticed, gals," she persisted, "that thar hain't been a death

in the house sence we took him in? An' I missed my reg'lar spell o' bronchitis last winter an' this one tew—so fur," she added dismally, and began to cough and lay her hands against her chest. "That was allus the way when I was a young 'un," she continued after a while; "I never had a pet dog or cat or even a tame chicken that it did n't up an' run erway sooner or later. This here loss, gals, 'll be the death o' me! Naow, mark my words!"

Then followed a consultation among the younger sisters, the result of which was that they met Abe in the morning with a unanimous petition. They could neither ask nor expect him to remain; that was impossible, but—

"Hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!"

cried Abe, waving an imaginary flag as he entered. "Sam'l dropped us at the gate. Him an' Blossy went on ter see Holmes tew dicker erbout buyin' back the old place. Takes Blossy an' Sam'l tew dew business. They picked out my clothes between them yist'day arternoon deown ter Injun village, in the Emporium. Haow yew like 'em? Splendid, eh? See my yaller silk handkerchief, tew? We jest dropped in ter git our things. We thought mebbe yew 'd want ter slick up the room an' git ready fer the new—"

He was allowed to say no more. The sisters, who had been kissing and hugging Angy one by one, now swooped upon him. He was hugged, too, with warm, generous congratulation, his hands were both shaken until they

ached, and his clothes and Angy's silently admired. But no one said a word, for not one of the sisters was able to speak. Angy, thinking that she divined a touch of jealousy, hastened to throw off her wrap and display the familiar old worn silk gown beneath.

"I told Abe I jest would n't git a new silk until you each had one made tew. Blossy sent for the samples. Blossy—"

"All I need 's a shroud," interrupted Aunt Nancy grimly.

Angy and Abe both stared at her. She did look gray this morning. She did seem feeble and her cough did sound hollow. The other sisters glanced also at Aunt Nancy, and Sarah Jane took her hand, while she nudged

Mrs. Homan with her free elbow and Mrs. Homan nudged Ruby Lee and Ruby Lee glanced at Lazy Daisy and Lazy Daisy drawled out meaningly:

"Miss Abigail!"

Then Miss Abigail, twisting the edge of her apron nervously, spoke:

"Much obliged to you I be in behalf o' all the sisters, Brother Abe an' ter Angy tew. We know yew 'll treat us right. We know that yew," resting her eyes on Abe's face, "will prove ter be the 'angel unawares' that we been entertainin', but we don't want yew ter waste yer money on a cart-load o' silk dresses. All we ask o' yew is jest ernough tew allow us ter advertise fer another brother member ter take yer place."

Who could describe the expression that flashed across Abe's face?—hurt astonishment, wounded pride, jealous incomprehension.

"Ter take my place!" he glanced about the hall defiantly. Who dared to enter there and take his place?—*his place!*

"This is a old ladies' home," he protested. "What right you got a-takin' in a good-fer-nuthin' old man? Mebbe he 'd rob yew er kill yew! When men git ter rampagin', yew can't tell what they might dew."

Sarah Jane nodded her head knowingly, as if to exclaim:

"I told yer so!"

But Miss Abigail hurriedly explained that it was a man and wife that they wanted. She blushed as she added

that of course they would not take a man without his wife.

"No, indeed! That 'd be highly improper," smirked Ruby Lee.

Then Abe went stamping to the stairway, saying sullenly:

"All right. I 'll give yew all the money yew want fer advertisin', an' yew kin say he 'll be clothed an' dressed proper, tew, an' supplied with terbaccer an' readin'-matter besides; but jest wait till the directors read that advertisement! They had me here sorter pertendin' ter be unbeknownst. Come on, Angy. Let 's go up-stairs an' git our things. Let 's—"

Aunt Nancy half arose from her chair, resting her two shaking hands on the arms of it.

"Brother Abe," she called quaver-

ingly after the couple, "I guess yew kin afford ter fix up any objections o' the directors."

Angy pressed her husband's arm as she joined him in the upper hall.

"Don't yer see, Abe. They don't realize that that poor old gentleman, whoever he may be, won't be yew. They jest know that *yew* was *yew;* an' they want ter git another jest as near like yew as they kin."

Abe grunted, yet nevertheless went half-way down-stairs again to call more graciously to the sisters that he would give them a reference any time for knowing how to treat a man just right.

"That feller 'll be lucky, gals," he added in tremulous tones. "I hope he 'll appreciate yew as I allers done."

Then Abe went to join Angy in the

room which the sisters had given to him that bitter day when the cry of his heart had been very like unto:

*"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!"*

After all, what was there of his and Angy's here? Their garments they did not need now. They would leave them behind for the other old couple that was to come. There was nothing else but some simple gifts. He took up a pair of red wristlets that Mrs. Homan had knit, and tucked them in his new overcoat pocket. He also took Abigail's bottle of "Jockey Club" which he had despised so a few days ago, and tucked that in his watch-pocket. When he bought himself a watch, he would buy a new clock for the dining-room down-stairs, too,—a clock with no such

asthmatic strike as the present one possessed. All his personal belongings —every one of them gifts—he found room for in his pockets. Angy had even less than he. Yet they had come practically with nothing—and compared with that nothing, what they carried now seemed much. Angy hesitated over the pillow-shams. Did they belong to them or to the new couple to come? Abe gazed at the shams too. They had been given to him and Angy last Christmas by all the sisters. They were white muslin with white cambric frills, and in their centers was embroidered in turkey-red cotton, "Mother," on one pillow, "Father," on the other. Every sister in the Home had taken at least one stitch in the names.

Father and Mother—not Angy and Abe! Why Father and Mother? A year ago no one could have foreseen the fortune, nor have prophesied the possession of the room by another elderly couple.

Angy drew near to Abe, and Abe to Angy. They locked arms and stood looking at the pillows. He saw, and she saw, the going back to the old bedroom in the old home across the woods and over the field—the going back. And in sharp contrast they each recalled the first time that they had stepped beneath that roof nearly half a century ago,—the first home-coming, —when her mother-heart and his father-heart had been filled with the hope of children—children to bless their marriage, children to complete

their home, children to love, children to feed them with love in return.

"Let 's adopt some leetle folks," said Angy, half in a whisper. "I 'm afeard the old place 'll seem lonesome without—"

"Might better adopt the sisters"; he spoke almost gruffly. "I allers did think young 'uns would be the most comfort tew yew after they growed up."

"A baby is dretful cunnin'," Angy persisted. "But," she added sadly, "I don't suppose a teethin' mite would find much in common with us."

"Anyway," vowed Abe, suddenly beginning to unfasten the pillow-shams, "these belong ter us, an' I 'm a-goin' ter take 'em."

They went down-stairs silently, the

shams wrapped in a newspaper carried under his arm.

"Waal, naow,"—he tried to speak cheerfully as they rejoined the others, and he pushed his way toward the dining-room,—"I 'll go an' git my cup an' sasser."

But Miss Abigail blocked the door, again blushing, again confused.

"That 'Tew-our-Beloved-Brother' cup," she said gently, her eyes not meeting the wound in his, "we 'bout concluded yew 'd better leave here fer the one what answers the ad. Yew got so much naow, an' him—"

She did not finish. She could not. She felt rather than saw the blazing of Abe's old eyes. Then the fire beneath his brows died out and a mist obscured his sight.

"Gals," he asked humbly, "would yew ruther have a new 'beloved brother'?"

For a space there was no answer. Aunt Nancy's head was bowed in her hands. Lazy Daisy was openly sobbing. Miss Ellie was twisting her fingers nervously in and out—she unwound them to clutch at Angy's arm as if to hold her. At last Miss Abigail spoke with so unaccustomed a sharpness that her voice seemed not her own:

"Sech a foolish question as that nobody in their sound senses would ask."

Abe sat down in his old place at the fireside and smiled a thousand smiles in one. He smiled and rubbed his hands before the blaze. The blaze itself seemed scarcely more bright and

warm than the light from within which transfigured his aged face.

"Gals," he chuckled in his old familiar way, "I dunno how Sam'l Darby 'll take it; but if Mother 's willin', I guess I won't buy back no more of the old place, 'cept'n' jest my rockin'-chair with the red roses onto it; an' all the rest o' this here plagued money I 'll hand over ter the directors, an' stay right here an' take my comfort."

Angy bent down and whispered in his ear: "I 'd ruther dew it, tew, Father. Anythin' else would seem like goin' a-visitin'. But yew don't want ter go an' blame me," she added anxiously, "ef yew git all riled up an' sick abed ag'in."

"Pshaw, Mother," he protested;

"yew fergit I was *adopted* then; naow I be *adoptin'*. Thar 's a big difference."

She lifted her face, relieved, and smiled into the relieved and radiant faces of Abe's "children," and her own.